

Natural Gas

Toxic Aliso Canyon Risks Draw Lawsuit From California Firefighters (1)

Sempra Energy's Southern California Gas Co. knowingly exposed firefighters to cancer-causing chemicals like benzene and formaldehyde as they tried to protect citizens during a major toxic gas leak three years ago, according to a new lawsuit.

Dozens of firefighters sued SoCalGas and Sempra over the toxic gases that emitted for months out of the Aliso Canyon Natural Gas Storage Facility, saying the companies intentionally misled first responders about the potential dangers. As a result, the firefighters say they have experienced nosebleeds, migraines, dizziness, and even cancer.

The complaint alleges SoCalGas partnered with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health to assure firefighters that there were "no hazards" and that the natural gas was not toxic despite actually knowing about the presence of benzene and formaldehyde.

"By withholding this vital information, SoCalGas failed to protect the community and the people protecting us," attorneys for the plaintiffs wrote in the lawsuit filed in California Superior Court Oct. 15.

The lawsuit seeking damages for firefighters marks the most recent legal development in the aftermath of what has been called the biggest gas leak in U.S. history, coming after a \$119.5 million settlement with Los Angeles and California regulatory agencies. The incident, which occurred from October 2015 to February 2016 near Porter Ranch, forced the evacuation of thousands of people.

"We have been advised that a complaint has been filed against SoCalGas on behalf of certain first re-

sponders relating to the 2015 Aliso Canyon gas leak," Melissa Bailey, a SoCalGas representative, told Bloomberg Environment in an email. "We have not been served with the complaint and have not yet had the opportunity to review it."

Benzene Levels The firefighters say the benzene levels during the leak were 100,000 parts per billion, 100,000 times higher than the state standard, in one gas well. In 1996, SoCalGas warned the public about a benzene risk, according to the firefighters' attorneys.

Jesse Creed of Panish Shea & Boyle LLP in Los Angeles, an attorney for the firefighters, said first responders "deserve justice."

"SoCalGas told them and the public it was safe because it cares more about its profits than our brave firefighters," Creed told Bloomberg Environment in a statement Oct. 16. "Now their bravery and courage are being punished with illness and injury. Our first responders deserve a full accounting of the damage SoCalGas has inflicted on them."

Another attorney representing the plaintiffs, Patricia Oliver of Parris Law Firm in Lancaster, Calif., said SoCalGas withheld important information and that the company "should be called to provide full disclosure of the composition of gas stored in this facility so that all of us are safe."

The case is *Ames v. S. Calif. Gas Company*, Cal. Super. Ct., No. 18STCV00854, 10/15/18.

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