

## Disaster in Porter Ranch Affects Thousands

By Neko Gianquinto and Dylan Moses

PORTER RANCH, CALIFORNIA - A major methane gas leak erupted on October 23, 2015 and has affected thousands of people in many different ways. The leak was caused by the rupturing of a gas storage well in a SoCal Gas Co facility. The odorless, invisible methane gas spewed out of the well at an alarming rate of 97,000 pounds per hour, causing more than 100,000 metric tons of methane to be released into the atmosphere. The methane level in the air was twice the amount of clean oxygen.

Because of this, many residents were struck with sickness, including a woman named Christine Katz,

whose family was greatly impacted by the leak. She was completely unaware of the leak until she noticed a peculiar smell in the air.

“It would start off early in the morning, then it would kind of dissipate,” Katz explained to CNN News reporters. “And this continued on each day.”

A few weeks later, Christine's two-year-old daughter Ava started having coughing fits and developed breathing difficulties. Her doctor put her on an inhaler. This was all occurring before the neighborhood was notified about the methane leak.

In November, Ava got sick for a second time, this time for even longer. She ran a high fever and had a seizure.

“She was rushed to the hospital, and they couldn't figure out what was wrong with her,” Katz said. “She was in the ICU for four days.” The Katz family moved to a home 30 miles away after being notified of the leak and SoCalGas paid for three months of their rent.

However, Ava wasn't the only one to get sick. Many Porter Ranch residents complained of headaches, nausea, dizziness, as well as nosebleeds. “The many symptoms reported can likely be traced to the short-term effects of mercaptan,” said Michael Jarrett, who leads the Department of Environmental Health Sciences at UCLA. Mercaptan is the chemical added to the gas to give it a putrid odor. “The methane gas being leaked is most likely not harmful,” he explained.

The gas leak didn't only impact residents on a personal health level, but also on a financial level. Sarah Tall's business was affected greatly by the methane leak. Tall runs a small self-defense teaching business by the name of King TaeKwonDo. Business was through the roof at the start of fall. Then, she noticed something very strange: in late winter, no one was signing up.

“In November we were busy” Tall told journalists from Al Jazeera. “Then, in December, I noticed people were not coming.”

Tall received a letter from her landlord stating that if she doesn't pay the late rent fees, she will face eviction.

“My bank account is getting dry,” she said. Sarah explained that she is purely unable to make the full payment each month. Due to the leak, more than 5,000 residents moved to different homes and hotels outside of the town. This caused many businesses to make less than 85 percent of their regular earnings.

Multiple lawsuits were filed by Porter Ranch citizens against SoCalGas. On Tuesday, February 2, the first criminal charges were pressed against the gas company for failing to notify the state authorities on time. If they were to be convicted, the company could have been fined up to \$25,000 for each day they failed to report the leak to officials. Another charge was filed by Attorney General Kamala Harris, alleging health and safety law violations.

After five months of waiting, the leak was finally capped on Thursday, February 18. However, most residents still aren't returning to their homes anytime soon. Dennis V. Arriola, CEO and president of SoCalGas agreed in this statement, “While the leak has been stopped and the well permanently sealed, we have much work to do, partnering with state and local agencies to help the local community and impacted residents to return to normal.” After hearing this, most Porter Ranch citizens hope this will be over in the near future.

Some residents have started their move back to Porter Ranch, but because of the leak, real estate prices have dropped significantly, and the majority of the houses hold much less value. Residents are now asking Governor Jerry Brown to inflict consequences for SoCalGas’ actions and the major effect the gas leak had on the people of Porter Ranch.