

California Methane Gas Leak is Worst U.S. Environmental Disaster Since BP Oil Spill

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As California Methane Leak Displaces Thousands, Will U.S. Regulate Natural Gas Sites Nationwide?

GUESTS

ERIN BROCKOVICH

a renowned consumer advocate and legal researcher. She is working with Weitz & Luxenberg to seek justice for victims of Porter Ranch gas leak. While a single mother of three working as a legal assistant, she helped win the biggest class action lawsuit in American history. The suit was against a multibillion-dollar corporation, the California power company Pacific Gas & Electric Company, which was accused of polluting a city's water supply. Her story was told in the Oscar-winning film starring Julia Roberts in 2000 called Erin Brockovich.

DAVID BALEN

president of Renaissance Homeowners Association, located just outside of the well site. He's also a member of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council and board member of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood School.

In the nation's biggest environmental disaster since the BP oil spill, a runaway natural gas leak above Los Angeles has emitted more than 150 million pounds of methane. Thousands of residents in the community of Porter Ranch have been evacuated and put in temporary housing. The fumes have caused headaches and nosebleeds. The company responsible, Southern California Gas Company, says it could take three to four months to stop the breach. We are joined by two guests: renowned consumer advocate and legal researcher Erin Brockovich, who helped win the biggest class action lawsuit in American history and is now working to seek justice for victims of the Porter Ranch gas leak, and David Balen, president of Renaissance Homeowners Association, located just outside of the breached well site.

TRANSCRIPT

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JUAN GONZÁLEZ: We turn now to what's being called the nation's biggest environmental disaster since the 2010 BP oil spill. A runaway natural gas leak above Los Angeles has emitted more than 150 million pounds of methane since late October. Thousands of residents in the community of Porter Ranch have been evacuated. Two schools have been closed and more than 2,000 families forced into temporary housing. The leak is coming from a natural gas storage facility owned by the Southern California Gas Company, or SoCalGas. The exact cause is unknown, but it's believed that well casing was breached deep below the ground. Adding to the confusion, the methane is invisible to the eye, so residents can't see the fumes causing them headaches and nosebleeds.

AMY GOODMAN: Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming. The leak is so severe, it will account for one-quarter of all California's methane emissions in just one month. SoCalGas says it could take three to four months to stop it.

The company declined our request to be interviewed, but issued a statement saying, quote, "SoCalGas is working as quickly and safely as possible to stop the natural gas leak at its Aliso Canyon Storage Facility, and we are redoubling our efforts to aggressively address its impact on the community and the environment."

Well, for more, we go to Los Angeles. We're joined by Erin Brockovich, the renowned consumer advocate. While a single mother of three working as a legal assistant, she helped win the biggest class action lawsuit in American history. Her story was told in the Oscar-winning film starring Julia Roberts called, well, Erin Brockovich. She's now working to seek justice for victims of the Porter Ranch gas leak. And we're joined by David Balen, president of the Renaissance Homeowners Association, located just outside the breached well site.

We don't have that much time. Erin Brockovich, explain why you've gotten involved with this case. Explain it to a global audience.

ERIN BROCKOVICH: Well, this is something, unfortunately, that I've been doing in my career for 22 years, and that's working in big environmental disasters. And when happens, oftentimes the community will reach out to me. And this one is very close to me because I'm actually their neighbor. I don't live too far from there. And the minute I saw what was going on, and hearing from them and what's happening to them, that's just my call to action, was to get out and see what I could do to help the community.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, David Balen, could you tell us about when you first became aware of the problem and what the gas company originally told the residents of your community?

DAVID BALEN: Absolutely. You know, I can remember like it was yesterday. Going back to October 23rd, the afternoon, we were—the community was overtaken by noxious gases. The neighbors were reporting—they thought there might be a home that had a major leak. We did have the gas company come out. They were completely denying that there was ever a gas leak. They went from home to home to home, giving everybody the A-OK. And, you know, the gas company didn't admit to having a gas leak until the following Wednesday—that would put it probably about around the 28th of October. I had notified the LAUSD the following Monday, which was October 26, that there was an issue and that our children needed to be protected. They had inquired to the LAUSD, as well as SoCalGas, and they were told that there wasn't a leak, as well, until that Wednesday, when everybody was notified that we did have a major leak.

AMY GOODMAN: A time-lapsed infrared image makes visible the leak of the methane gas. According to California's air quality regulators, the leak accounts for 25 percent of daily greenhouse gas emissions in the state—about the same amount of emissions as driving 160,000 cars for a year or consuming 90 million gallons of gas. Erin Brockovich, you have called this the worst environmental disaster since the BP oil spill of 2010. Talk about the scope of this.

ERIN BROCKOVICH: The scope of it is enormous. And there is another videotape out there that really helps us see pollution, because I think we can't see it, so therefore we don't always think that it's real. And it's amazing. It looks like a volcano that's just erupting, that won't stop. And when you fly over and you have the right lenses and you can—because methane, you know, the gases, you can't see. But as they use the right screen, you can actually see that it's like a black plume of smoke through there that just continues to billow out. And the magnitude of it is enormous.

You know, BP was something that they couldn't stop, that was way deep in the earth, which is exactly what's happening out here. And as we begin to peel back the layers of the onion, if you will, and find out what happened and why we're in this type of situation, the idea that they have safety valves in place at 8,000 feet down, that Southern Cal Gas removed and never replaced, which would have prevented this type of catastrophic disaster, is mind-blowing. And so, you're talking billions of cubic feet of gas under there, and all of this methane, day in and day out, is just billowing out of this site, that's infecting a very large landmass, is an ongoing, constant assault to the community and a huge square mileage. We're working with experts now to take all of the information so we can actually see an air plume and the magnitude of how far this has gone.

But this is going to continue. It's been going on for months. It's going to continue to go on for more months. As you said, it's going to contribute to what? One-quarter of all of those emissions for the state of California. It's outrageous. It's frightening, at its best. It's horribly concerning to this community. They are sick. And the impacts keep going on. And that's what makes it so catastrophic. And it's frightening for us to have a company like this, where you can't get down there, and you've removed a valve, you didn't replace that valve, and you now don't have the ability to stop this for half a year or longer—is a bad scenario.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And, Erin Brockovich, how transparent has the company been about exactly where the leak is and what it's going to have to do now to get to it?

ERIN BROCKOVICH: Well, I don't know that they've been that transparent as at all. And I think David can certainly tell you, as a homeowner and a family there, where their delays are. I'll tell you, as we back this up and start looking at what they didn't do, how that's going to change regulation, how it's going to help us look at—we need better enforcement around these facilities before we have a disaster that's even bigger than this one. They are not that informative to the community about where their monitoring sites are.

When you do look at it, it's certainly not that reasonable, because they're really not telling you what they're doing or where they're monitoring—by way of example, that they are continually finding persistently high levels, at their different monitoring locations, of sulfur, which is very important. I have a sulfur allergy. Many people do. Long term, that can cause health impacts. They're also finding hydrocarbons, but they're not very forthwith about what it is they're finding, but they're finding it in high concentrations.

And this community needs to know the truth. And if we don't have it, nobody can protect them. So I do not feel that Southern Cal Gas has been that transparent at all about what they've done in the past and what they're doing today.

AMY GOODMAN: So, David Balen—

DAVID BALEN: Absolutely. Yes.

AMY GOODMAN: —how are you living there? We're seeing signs, you know, kids holding up signs, putting on masks. Are you being offered full relocation for the moment?

DAVID BALEN: Well, yes. We've been in the process now since early December. We were away for the Thanksgiving holiday. There was no point to start the relocation process, because we were out of town. But we have been subjected to just a lack of [respect] as a community. The gas company is taking their time on relocating people. We've had roughly about 2,200 families relocated. We've got over 7,000 people waiting to be relocated. I mean, it's terrible. The lines are getting bigger and bigger by the day. And the gas doesn't stop. And fortunately, where we live, we have the Santa Ana

winds. Sometimes they go to the east, sometimes they go to the west. So some days it's good, some days it's terrible. You know, the community is subjected to the smell of the methane, which has the mercaptans in it, and it's the mercaptans that are making the community sick. We have numerous counts of people with nosebleeds, nausea, animals getting—vomiting, having lesions on their faces. It's nonstop. And the gas company needs to put a stop to this. They really need to get on the ball and stop this issue.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: And what's been the role of state officials, health officials, their pressure on the company?

AMY GOODMAN: And of Jerry Brown, the governor?

DAVID BALEN: You know what? You know, I hold them all accountable, from Jerry Brown to Eric Garcetti to my councilman, Mitchell Englander. All of them have taken their time. Now, Mitchell Englander has been outspoken lately, but all of them were MIA the first five weeks of this issue, I mean. And, you know, this issue is—when it comes out to the—when it comes out at the very end, this is going to be disastrous, at least. It's going to be a long, outstanding—it's not only going to affect the community, it's going to affect pretty much the world. This methane is going to be huge to our greenhouse effect.

ERIN BROCKOVICH: That's a very good question. I want to jump in here, though, about the agencies. And it is their lack of involvement—and again, if this is something that we back up, whether the health department or state agencies, their lack of oversight as to what's been going—this is the second-largest natural gas reserve in the United States.

DAVID BALEN: Absolutely.

ERIN BROCKOVICH: And these agencies should have much stricter oversight, and they don't. We—

AMY GOODMAN: I mean, Governor Brown was in Paris, when we were, at the U.N. climate summit.

DAVID BALEN: Sure. And so was Eric Garcetti.

ERIN BROCKOVICH: Yes. And this was a topic of conversation there. And this community really needs a state of emergency. And, you know, people don't want to say evacuation. And I think that that's something that we need to look at, because this is a large area, and maybe these people do need to be evacuated, until this situation is brought under control and you can absolutely assure their safety upon return. So there has been agency failures. It certainly feels that the state and the governor have been slow to respond. This is—

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to have to leave it there, but, of course, we'll continue to follow this story. Renowned consumer advocate Erin Brockovich, Porter Ranch resident David Balen, thanks so much for joining us from Los Angeles.

P.S.

* Democracy Now! DECEMBER 30, 2015:

http://www.democracynow.org/2015/12/30/erin_brockovich_california_methane_gas_leak