An Appropriate Health Study for Residents Affected by the Aliso Canyon Gas Release

Background

In the settlement reached this month between Southern California Gas (SCG) and the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD), a scope of work entitled "Health Study" was included as an attachment. That scope is inconsistent with the scope of work previously agreed-upon by a panel of health experts convened by AQMD in the fall of 2016. The AQMD panel included experts from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (County Public Health), OEHHA, the CDPH, the CARB, the USEPA, SCAQMD, and academic researchers from the USC and UC Irvine.

In March 2016, County Public Health began discussions with SCAQMD on the direction and scope of the health study. Around the same time, Assemblyman Wilk introduced Assembly Bill 1903, which recognized the need and called for a comprehensive long-term health study. That bill would have required CPUC to authorize the State OEHHA to study the long-term health impacts on individuals who resided within a 12-mile radius of the Aliso Canyon facility. The scope of the OEHHA health study was estimated to cost approximately $12.9 million for the first three years, and thereafter, $3.3 million annually beginning in the fourth year and continuing until the end of 2028. In summary, OEHHA envisioned that the study would continue for 7 to 10 years, with a projected total cost in the range of $35-40 million.

It appears that AB 1903 was placed in suspense in August 2016, in deference to an apparent pathway for SCAQMD and SCG to define an appropriate health study through the SCAQMD Abatement Order. However, SCAQMD and SCG could not agree on the scope, prompting a civil lawsuit. Subsequently, SCAQMD convened the panel of health experts referenced above on October 26, 2016 to provide the legal case with the appropriate scope and general design of the study. The expert panel agreed in December 2016 to a recommended scope for the SCAQMD health study, which County Public Health believes would have cost in the range of $35-40 million, similar to the initial scope proposed by OEHHA.

It appears, however, that once AB 1903 was suspended in August, 2016, SCG began to actively negotiate with SCAQMD for a study design that was substantially reduced in scope. This ultimately led to settlement of the AQMD lawsuit. Neither the $1 million allocation nor the scope included in the SCG-SCAQMD settlement addresses the components of a meaningful health study, and will likely not contribute useful information to any prospective health study in the future nor answer many of the questions that are important to affected community members. The health study defined by the SCAQMD panel of health experts is described below.

Recommended Scope of Health Study

Based on the existing data, the SCAQMD panel of health experts agreed that the health study would examine health outcomes associated with toxic releases from the facility, and monitor the health and well-being of exposed members of the population over several years. This long-term health study would also include, but not be limited to:

- Advanced environmental risk modeling to estimate community exposures
- Estimation of long-term toxicological risks

- Filling existing data gaps, particularly with respect to sulfur odorants
- Continuous air monitoring at the field and in the community to evaluate ongoing exposures
- Evaluation of broader impacts of the gas leak on quality of life and well-being
- Community engagement throughout the health study process

Need for Health Study

The disaster that occurred at Aliso Canyon is a singular, unprecedented event. There has never been such an extraordinary toxic release, so we are in uncharted waters in determining what health impacts, if any, could result in the long-term from the exposure. To not demand an appropriate health study would be to deny the facts of the situation and ignore the health needs of the affected community.

It is important to remember that DPH determined that the likely cause of the illnesses observed in residents of Porter Ranch were the unknown chemicals that SCG injected into the well in late October 2015 in an effort to plug the well. As highlighted in DPH reports, the observed symptoms (including nosebleeds and extensive contact sensitivity) could not be explained by what is known about methane gas, the odorants, or the trace carcinogens contained in the gas emissions.

In acknowledging the need for a long-term study, County Public Health is acknowledging two facts: First, the exact causative agent of the observed symptoms remains unknown (and SCG has repeatedly refused to provide the information that is needed about what was injected, and subsequently expelled, from the well). Second, it is biologically plausible that a chemical agent that can cause massive, moderately severe symptoms in a broad population could cause long-term chronic health effects, including dermatologic, respiratory, cardiovascular and immune system problems, and possibly even cancer. Only a long-term study that is prospective in nature (i.e., a duration of at least several years) and has sufficient sample size to detect rare chronic diseases is adequate to answer obvious health questions (e.g., Can this exposure cause chronic lung disease, cancer, or other chronic conditions?).

The health study will benefit the community by assuring residents that the County and the scientific community cares about their health concerns; that the medical care required to treat possible long-term health effects related to the exposure can be reimbursed by SCG; and that residents who have been exposed to this extraordinary event can have confidence that their concerns about the health effects of this exposure are being studied in an appropriate manner.

It is imperative that we support a health study that is appropriate to the scale and significance of this event; that would hold SCG accountable for potentially very serious health consequences which it has caused; and that would plow new ground in defining the accountability that municipal governments require in finding solutions to problems that are created by the close proximity of hazardous industries to highly populated communities.