

Los Angeles Daily News

Group still trying to shutter gas field

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Monday

The red T-shirt clan began gathering about 8 a.m. Thursday at a familiar place, the corner of Tampa Avenue and Sesnon Boulevard near the entrance to Southern California Gas Co.'s Aliso Canyon natural gas storage field.

About 40 of the members would assemble, most wearing their red T-shirts with the phrase "Shut it Down" emblazoned across the front. The gas company is the focus of their wrath.

I spotted the group's leader and extended my hand. "How goes it," I asked.

"Still fighting the fight," said Matt Pakucko, president and co-founder of Save Porter Ranch, the group waging the battle to close the massive field.

It was the start of another demonstration calling for closure of the facility, the source of the nation's biggest and longest methane discharge.

But it would not be the mass gathering of several hundred people, events common after the leak was discovered on the afternoon of Oct. 23. State officials eventually ordered that the field be shut down temporarily and all 114 wells inspected before it can reopen.

Save Porter Ranch wants Aliso Canyon permanently closed.

The intersection at Tampa and Sesnon, the community's northern boundary, does not get much traffic and there were only a few horn honks of support from the dozen or so cars that passed by.

Only a few news outlets showed up to cover the event. Pakucko, a music producer and engineer, noticed the lack of attention 10 months after the leak was discovered and six months after it was stopped.

"Without a huge plume of gas coming out, it's not a media event," he said. "Can you believe it's 10 months later and what's happened to us. We're still getting sick. SoCalGas has got to shut it all down."

The group has an ally in Darrell Park, a candidate for the 5th District seat on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, who showed up at the event. The district includes Porter Ranch.

"You guys are amazing. We're here to stay, they can go away," Park said of the gas company. "We don't need this facility. It's a piggy bank for the gas company."

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Powers, who has been an expert witness before various state agencies such as the California Energy Commission, had given Save Porter Ranch some key information to use in its fight with government officials, including Gov. Jerry Brown, to close Aliso Canyon.

Powers analyzed a 61-page report compiled by a consortium of energy agencies on the state's plan to manage the natural gas supply this winter given Aliso Canyon's current status.

It turns out that the winter natural gas supply will outstrip demand even with Aliso Canyon offline, according to both the state report and Powers analysis.

But it looks like Pakucko and his group still have a tough fight on their hands to eliminate Aliso Canyon's supply.

"The assessment shows Southern California residents may still face challenges. Other issues could arise: Gas lines can freeze, regional demand could increase from other western states connected to California's system, and equipment breakdowns could limit delivery capacity. The authors of the action plan commend Southern Californians for their response so far to calls for energy conservation and urge them to continue their efforts this summer and into the winter," said Robert Weisenmiller, chairman of the California Energy Commission, in a statement.

And Aliso may soon be back in business.

"SoCalGas is working to restore injection and normal operations at Aliso Canyon, in compliance with all new regulations," company spokesman Melissa Bailey said in an email. "We are working toward being able to begin injections at Aliso Canyon by late summer to prepare for the winter,"

And if that happens I expect the size of the protests to swell, and the media to pay more attention to this issue once again.