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Department of Energy official wants Aliso Canyon gas field to reopen

By Brenda Gazzar, May 22, 2017.

A top federal official is urging the “near-term reopening” of the Aliso Canyon storage facility after injections were halted in the wake of a months-long disastrous gas leak that began in October, 2015.

In a letter to the state’s primary energy policy and planning agency Friday, the U.S. Department of Energy’s Acting Under Secretary for Science and Energy Patricia A. Hoffman told the California Energy Commission that it and its sister agencies have shown “extraordinary dedication” in meeting regional reliability requirements, including the addition of renewable generation facilities. The Department of Energy is also encouraged by last winter’s rain and snowpack, which shore up the state’s water-power capacity.

“Nevertheless, it appears that despite these efforts, without the availability of Aliso Canyon or some adequate functional equivalent, the region remains vulnerable to energy supply disruptions and possible electricity blackouts triggered by severe weather, unanticipated outages of key facilities, natural or man-made disasters, or a combination of these events,” Hoffman wrote. “The reality is there are many constraints to the transmission of electricity and natural gas in California that are only exacerbated by Aliso Canyon being unavailable in its full capacity.”

Recharging the Southern California Gas Co. facility to its full capacity — 86 billion cubic feet — would be a slow process and may not make a significant contribution this summer, she said. But “reopening it soon is required” for ensuring access for the coming winter, Hoffman said.

An L.A. County study completed earlier this year found that several mitigation efforts in place have worked well enough so that withdrawing natural gas from the wells in Aliso Canyon is unnecessary in the short term.

The massive Aliso Canyon gas leak, which has been described as unprecedented, sickened hundreds of residents and prompted the relocation of more than 8,300 households and two schools in the northwest San Fernando Valley.

A joint technical analysis found expected demand can be met without the Aliso Canyon natural gas storage facility — “assuming the pipeline supply is at 100 percent and adequate storage inventory remains available,” according to a statement from Robert B. Weisenmiller, chair of the California Energy Commission, on Monday.

There are risks regarding energy reliability in the summer if the electric system is not fully available or gas or electric supplies are limited, he said.

“The mitigation measures being implemented, including continued conservation by Southern Californians should help meet energy needs,” Weisenmiller said. “However, prolonged periods of hot weather and other unpredictable events can pose problems to electricity delivery.”

SoCalGas, which owns and operates the facility, reiterated in a statement Monday their “serious concerns” about its ability to reliably serve its customers this summer in light of current restrictions and limitations on the region’s energy system.

“If supplies fall short, our only option is to shut-off electric generators, refineries and other critical services,” the utility said.

The company said it also has concerns about planning assumptions regarding its system’s operating expectations made by state agencies. And while critics have pointed out that SoCalGas has made it through the year without the use of Aliso Canyon facility, “the fact is, the state was lucky to have mild summer and winter seasons last year and no unplanned system outages.”

The California Department of Conservation, in a statement, said it’s currently reviewing public input on the findings of its comprehensive safety review at the storage facility and is determining whether it is safe to allow injections of natural gas to resume.

“Protecting public health and safety, and the environment is our first priority,” said Teresa Schilling, assistant director at the department.

The California Public Utilities Commission is also in the midst of determining whether the use of the underground storage facility should be limited, and if so, under what conditions and parameters. That decision is expected as early as mid-2018.

Issam Najm, president of the Porter Ranch Neighborhood Council, said Hoffman’s letter seems to be a political statement on behalf of President Donald Trump’s administration “when they have been silent on this issue all this time.”

Rather than a “passing statement of concern,” the administration should “bring resources to the problem” and “help provide expertise” to find a lasting solution, Najm said.