

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

L.A. leak is the tip of the melting iceberg
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The massive natural gas leak that has sent clouds of methane billowing over Los Angeles County's Aliso Canyon may seem like a faraway crisis, one of those freak mega-disasters that sometimes seem a specialty of L.A.

It's not. California has about a dozen similar facilities for underground gas storage scattered throughout the state from Playa del Rey to the Bay Area to Lodi. Old geological cavities that once held oil wells, salt mines or water, they've been repurposed to hold the surplus natural gas that Californians use to fire electrical plants at peak times and heat homes in winter.

Back in the day, that strategy seemed to make sense. But today, while the storage sites serve a useful purpose, they're also decrepit, leak-prone and regulated by a set of Depression-era laws that really need to be re-examined.

When gas slips out, either in a big way or via smaller "fugitive" emissions, the heat-trapping methane that is a key natural gas component worsens global warming by orders of magnitude over carbon dioxide. Depending on the measure, the Aliso Canyon leak, at its peak, was spewing the climate pollution equivalent of 7 million cars, six coal-fired plants or 75 percent of the state's entire oil refining industry emissions.

Plus, over the years, development has been allowed – irresponsibly – to grow up around these storage sites, or, worse, vice versa. [South Sacramento nearly got one in 2007](#), after a storage facility to serve Sacramento Metropolitan Utility District, among others, was proposed for a sandstone formation in a former Florin gas field 3,800 feet below the Avondale/Glen Elder neighborhood.

Local activists fought it until 2012, when the California Public Utilities Commission finally was persuaded to nix it. However, were it not for the 2010 San Bruno pipeline explosion and the advocacy of then-Councilman Kevin McCarty, then-Sen. Darrell Steinberg and Legal Services of Northern California, which worked pro bono, the working class enclave might be bracing for the kind of fallout that the L.A. suburb of Porter Ranch is [experiencing right now](#).

This week, Sens. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, Ben Allen, D-Santa Monica, and Ricardo Lara, D-Bell Gardens, and Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León [announced a package of bills](#) aimed at addressing current and potential future hazards from natural gas storage. The bills, which build on an emergency proclamation Gov. Jerry Brown [issued last week](#), would shut down old wells until they can be deemed safe.

They also would replace the seven (count 'em) agencies that have roles in incidents like these with a single point of accountability at the Office of Emergency Services and require the polluters – Southern California Gas Co. in this case – to [pay for the damage](#) out of their own profits, without charging ratepayers.

The Senate proposal also echoes Brown's call for annual inspections of all natural gas storage facilities. And it sets some aggressive targets for long-term reduction in so-called "short lived climate pollutants" such as methane.

That last idea is particularly important, because if there's one lesson to take away from this disaster, it's that stashing greenhouse gas reservoirs under communities [isn't a sustainable solution](#).

Natural gas may be cleaner than coal, and necessary for the moment. But the sooner our reliance shifts to renewable energy sources, the less we'll have to worry where the next Aliso Canyon will be.

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