

STATE SENATOR WANTS TO KNOW: IS THE PLAYA DEL REY NATURAL GAS STORAGE FIELD WORTH THE RISK?

Posted by [The Argonaut](#) | Jul 17, 2019 |

By Gary Walker



The Jan. 11 eruption at an abandoned oil well along Via Marina has heightened concerns about underground oil and gas fields

Protect Playa Now, a grassroots community group advocating the closure of SoCal Gas Co.'s natural gas storage facility adjacent to the Ballona Wetlands, is hosting a "Marina del Rey Gas Blowout Community Forum" from 2 to 4:30 p.m. Sunday (July 21) at Chabad of Marina del Rey, 2929 Washington Blvd. (RSVP at protectplayanow.org.) Flyers describe the event as an interactive discussion of lingering public safety questions related to the Jan. 11 blowout of a long-abandoned oil well on Via Marina, public agencies' initial failure to notify the public of the blowout, and longstanding concerns about the safety of the Playa del Rey gas storage field. Local activists have voiced concerns that the gas field and blowout may be related, but scientists and public officials

have not identified any concrete causal relationship, and the abandoned oil well — one of hundreds in the area — is not under the purview of SoCal Gas.

But with public memory of the disastrous 2015 Aliso Canyon gas leak in Porter Ranch still strong, calls to shut down the Playa del Rey gas field continue to pick up steam. L.A. City Councilman Mike Bonin has publicly supported the idea, and now state Sen. Ben Allen (D- Santa Monica) has asked the state Department of Conservation to assess its future viability.

SoCal Gas spokeswoman Christine Detz warned that restrictions on natural gas storage could mean higher prices for consumers, saying the Playa del Rey facility and others like it “are critical to the reliability of Southern California’s natural gas and electricity systems.”

Allen requested the study following a report on underground gas storage safety risks by the California Council on Science and Technology, which found that the Playa del Rey gas storage field accommodates only about 1% of the state’s total natural gas storage but “is close to a densely populated area, and the risk of loss-containment at Playa del Rey is higher than at most other natural gas storage facilities.”

“I care about our region’s energy system and energy reliability. But given the findings of the CCST report, it seems prudent for us to look further into whether a reasonable cost-benefit balance has been struck given the relatively low amount of gas storage in play and the risks associated with the facility,” Allen wrote in a July 2 letter to California Oil and Gas Supervisor Kenneth Harris.

Gov. Gavin Newsom fired Harris on Friday after Consumer Watchdog and the FracTracker Alliance reported a drastic rise in hydraulic fracturing permits amid widespread conflicts of interest among regulators. gary@argonautnews.com

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