Preliminary Workshop Report:
Improving Emergency Response Coordination between Natural Gas Utilities Regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission and Emergency Response Authorities

Summary

This preliminary report by the Consumer Protection and Safety Division (CPSD) of the California Public Utilities Commission (Commission) identifies areas where public safety requires – and the public reasonably expects -- effective cooperation between natural gas utilities and emergency responders. With the goal of improving these vital interactions, CPSD makes several preliminary recommendations and asks for comment.

Background

CPSD's recommendations follow a two-day workshop on Emergency Response Planning held at the Commission on September 26 and 27, 2011, in connection with Rulemaking (R.) 11-02-019. The Commission opened the rulemaking in April, 2011, as a "forward-looking effort to establish a new model of natural gas pipeline safety regulation applicable to all California pipelines." (R.11-02-019 at 1.) As part of that effort, the Assigned Commissioner directed CPSD to begin an examination of how Commission-regulated natural gas utilities currently interact with emergency response authorities and to identify how interactions might be improved. (Scoping Memo and Ruling of Assigned Commissioner Michel Peter Florio, June 16, 2011, at 6.)

CPSD served the agenda for the Emergency Response Planning workshop on the service list for R.11-02-019 and broadly distributed it to federal, state, and local fire, law enforcement, and emergency response agencies and associations. The workshop was webcast to permit remote monitoring; approximately 40 persons attended and actively participated. For the agenda, see: http://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/efile/NOTICE/142110.pdf; for both the agenda and webcast, see: http://www.californiaadmin.com/cpuc.shtml.

The Day 1 program consisted of presentations on underlying topics in order to establish a common, substantive background useful to promote discussion, on Day 2, of the need for improvements in interaction and response.

Day 1 presenters provided overviews on:

- the design and operation of California's natural gas system, including abnormal conditions that can result in emergency situations;
- the role of the Commission in natural gas safety;
- utility perspectives on emergency plans and available training for natural gas emergencies; and
- emergency responder perspectives on natural gas emergency response.

See http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/PUC/events/110926_27Workshop.htm for the PowerPoint presentations shown on Day 1.

On Day 2, those present engaged in a facilitated, interactive discussion of the need for improvements in three areas: infrastructure and mapping; communications; and training.

Based on the workshop discussions and CPSD's informal discussions with others who represent natural gas utilities, first responder authorities, or local or state government, CPSD makes the following observations and related, preliminary recommendations.

Recommendations

1. ***Infrastructure and Mapping***

Premise: Emergency responders require maps and other information sufficient to identify the "critical utility infrastructure" (including natural gas infrastructure) present at a specific emergency site. "Critical utility infrastructure" is not a defined term. Its use by various workshop participants reflects recognition that while some information is essential, too much information (about comparatively minor utility facilities or that includes extensive sub-levels of detail) is neither necessary nor helpful and may be confusing.

Ensuring the security of disclosed information is a valid concern and may preclude public distribution. Further, the "need to know" may not rise to the same level for all emergency responders (fire response may require information at a level of detail that is not necessary for police response, for example). Security concerns must be balanced with the reality that certain information about natural gas and other utility infrastructure is publicly available now, such as permanent subsurface facility markers and information that statute requires utilities to provide in response to notifications from "one-call" centers. However desirable a single, highly secure clearinghouse may be (one that includes not only natural gas but all other "critical utility infrastructure"), such an effort will take significant time and resources to develop and it must be useful in the field. The Commission should not defer to such an effort but should act promptly on reasonable recommendations regarding natural gas infrastructure currently within its jurisdiction. CPSD recognizes that the scope of R.11-02-019, natural gas safety, does not provide a forum for the Commission to deliberate on recommendations that would govern other utility services (electric, water, etc.); accordingly, CPSD limits its focus to natural gas.

Recommendation:

California Government Code §4216(e) defines "high priority subsurface installation" for the purposes of regional "one-call" centers. The definition includes natural gas pipelines pressurized above 60 pounds per square inch gage (psig), as well as pipelines that transport petroleum and hazardous liquids, electric voltages of 60kv or higher, and pressurized sewer lines. CPSD suggests that the Commission determine that natural gas pipelines, as defined by Gov. Code §4216(e), are "critical" for the purposes of maps and other infrastructure information provided by Commission-regulated natural gas utilities to emergency response agencies within the utilities' service territories.[1] CPSD intends to

[1] At the workshop, several first responders raised the importance to them of having access to information about major water conveyances at a given emergency site (e.g., pipe size, location, capacity). CPSD

seek the assistance of the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration and the California State Fire Marshal's Office to require provision of the same "critical" information by pipelines the Commission does not regulate but which are under the jurisdiction of those agencies. Further review is needed to determine guidelines or requirements to govern the security of the information, the format of the information (e.g., paper, electronic), the method of access (e.g., web-based, DVD), and the method to report changes and updates.

Request for comment:

(1) Do you agree or disagree with CPSD's recommendations in the Infrastructure and Mapping topic area?
(2) How could CPSD's recommendations be modified to be more effective?
(3) What other Infrastructure and Mapping-type suggestions do you have to improve natural gas emergency response?

2. *Communications*:

Premise: Emergency responders need knowledgeable, trained, natural gas utility employees to arrive onsite on a timely basis when a natural gas emergency arises; neither statute nor regulation defines "timely." This issue has risen to the foreground because of two recent natural gas emergencies that occurred after business hours or on a national holiday. At present, utility employees are not available on a 24/7/365 standby basis at all locations throughout a utility service territory. "On call" utility employees are not required to live within their service area and typically have a significant response time to incidents. Workshop suggestions include establishing meaningful and realistic response times and/or a utility standby program. Implementation costs could be substantial and would be recovered in customer rates.

Recommendation:

CPSD recognizes that the natural gas utility service territories cover very large distances. It is probably unreasonable to mandate a fixed maximum response time to govern every utility facility and all possible emergencies. In addition, a myriad of factors, such as traffic congestion, the severity and number of emergencies occurring simultaneously, labor contract terms, and other financial costs associated with round-the-clock standby crews, can affect response to a natural gas emergency

CPSD recommends that the Commission examine the practicality and implementation cost of the following ideas for improving natural gas utility emergency response times and then adopt any determined to have merit:

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observes that Gov. Code §4216(e) does not include water pipelines or other water conveyances in the definition of "high priority subsurface installation"; moreover, the Commission has regulatory jurisdiction over only a small number of California water providers. However, after proper notice in another proceeding or by some other appropriate vehicle, the Commission may wish to consider what information Commission-regulated water utilities should provide to first responders and by what means.

- require utilities to provide immediate, expert-level guidance and advice, via a toll-free telephone number, to emergency responders/public safety agencies involved in on-scene natural gas pipeline emergency response, on a 24/7/365 basis and for the duration of the period until qualified utility employees arrive in person;
- require stand-by crews in more heavily populated areas, possibly during certain times of the day, who would be assigned to cover a fixed service territory area;
- require gas utilities to meet set response goals, rather than an across-the-board response time mandate (e.g., a specified percentage of all responses within the territory must occur within a specified maximum time period).

Request for comment:

(1) Do you agree or disagree with CPSD's recommendations in the Communications topic area?
(2) What has been your experience with utility response to natural gas emergencies?
(3) What is a reasonable response time for natural gas utility employees to respond to natural gas emergencies?
(4) What suggestions do you have to decrease utility response times and if you have a basis to estimate the costs associated with implementation of those suggestions, what are the estimated costs?
(5) What other Communications-type suggestions do you have to improve natural gas emergency response?

3. Training

Premise: Natural gas utility employees and emergency responders both benefit from collaborative emergency training exercises. Fixed site and mobile training exercises have different advantages (e.g. scale/intensity of burns, remote access); both are useful. Typically, emergency response training exercises have focused more heavily on emergencies related to electric infrastructure rather than natural gas infrastructure.

Recommendation:

CPSD recommends that natural gas utilities engage emergency response providers within their service territories in discussions about how to improve collaborative training that specifically incorporates natural gas emergency response. Utility-designed training scenarios should be as challenging as possible to further improve response capabilities and to proactively indentify and eliminate any potential weaknesses in response. Training should avoid a "one size fits all" approach and instead should consider differences such as size and financial resources of the response agency, that agency's response territory (urban/rural, type of terrain), and the number and/or complexity of utility facilities to which the agency may have to provide an emergency response.

Request for comment:

(1) Do you agree with CPSD's recommendations in the Training topic area?
(2) How could this recommendation be modified to be more effective?
(3) What other Training-type suggestions do you have do you have to improve natural gas emergency response?

Next Steps

CPSD invites comments on this preliminary workshop report on or before December 5, 2011. Please ***do not file*** comments with the Commission's Docket Office but submit them by ***email only*** to: allen.benitez@cpuc.ca.gov. Please include:

- the name of the person, organization or other entity on whose behalf the comments are being submitted; and
- contact information (name, address, telephone, and email) so that CPSD may follow-up with additional questions, if necessary.

Comments on this preliminary report will inform CPSD's final workshop report, which will be filed in the docket for R.11-02-019. CPSD will retain comments on the preliminary report and they will be made publicly available upon reasonable request.