

Gas line fireball erupts near Highway 99; 13 injured, 4 critically

By Marc Benjamin and Hannah Furfaro

A gas line rupture caused a fireball that closed Highway 99 in north Fresno. KEVIN LING — SPECIAL TO THE BEE

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More than a dozen people were injured, including four critically, when a gas line ruptured in northwest Fresno, creating a raging fire that halted Highway 99 traffic for several hours Friday afternoon.

The blast happened at the Fresno County Sheriff's Foundation gun range just east of the Highway 99 bridge over the San Joaquin River. Sheriff Margaret Mims said it wasn't immediately known what caused the explosion. Deputies at the scene said they saw a frontloader tractor driving along the dirt roadway above the range targets just before the fireball erupted at 2:28 p.m.

Of 13 injured, 11 sustained burns that required hospital treatment, including the county worker driving the frontloader and 10 Fresno County jail inmates who were part of a crew that does routine maintenance at the gun range. The crew was about 150 to 200 feet from the blast center.

Four of the injured were in Community Regional Medical Center in critical condition, with two more who were taken to Madera Community Hospital in serious condition before being transferred to Community, said Community Regional spokeswoman Mary Lisa Russell.

They will be treated at the Leon S. Peters Burn Center, the same center where Fresno Fire Capt. Pete Dern is still undergoing treatment for burns he sustained when a garage roof gave way beneath him as he was fighting a fire.

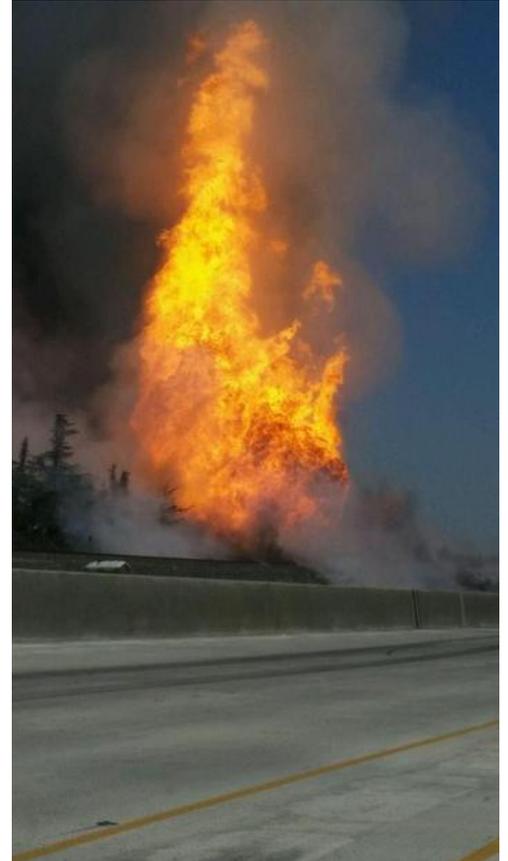
Saint Agnes Medical Center spokeswoman Kelley Sanchez said the hospital took in four patients with minor injuries who were expected to be treated and released.

Two deputies were treated at the scene.

After the fire was extinguished at 3:01 p.m., officials were able to start assessing the damage.

Mims described the scene as a "crater," with grass in the surrounding area up through the gun range completely charred. The frontloader involved in the blast was "completely demolished."

She said the county public works employee "was blown from the frontloader" when the explosion occurred.



The man, who was not identified, sustained serious burns, Mims said, but he was able to walk to a waiting ambulance that took him to Community Regional.

“Our thoughts are going out to the heavy equipment operator and that he is going to be OK, as well as the inmates who were injured,” Mims said.

She said two sheriff’s deputies were at the gun range about 400 feet from the gas line when the explosion occurred. Even though noise from the pipeline sounded like a jet engine, “they immediately went to the aid of the inmates and the frontloader operator,” she said. The deputies were treated for ringing in their ears and skin exposure she likened to a sunburn.

Looked like ‘a refinery’ on fire

The explosion jolted motorists and area residents. Edna Epps was on her way to pick up her grandson, Trevor Jobinger, from nearby River Bluff Elementary, about a mile southeast of the blast, when she got caught in traffic.

She said she got a call from 11-year-old Trevor, who was supposed to have a baseball game that was canceled after the fire started. Trevor told her he was practicing outside when “all of a sudden there was fire falling down around him.”

Kevin Ling, a freelance photographer from the Bay Area, was heading south on Highway 99 in Madera County on his way to visit his girlfriend in Fresno when he first noticed smoke in the distance shortly before 2:30 p.m.

“I thought maybe it was a car accident or a grass fire,” Ling said of his reaction as he passed Almond Avenue at the south end of Madera. But as he got closer, smoke became flames and he realized it was something much more serious. “It looked like it maybe was a refinery on fire,” he said.

By the time he reached Avenue 7 a few minutes later, just north of the San Joaquin River, Ling had his camera phone out to snap pictures. He and other motorists were still passing the scene on the south side of the river because the freeway had not yet been closed. “It had just happened because no (emergency crews) were there yet,” he said.

From his nearest vantage point on the freeway less than 200 feet away, Ling said he could see flames appearing to engulf the adjacent Union Pacific Railroad freight tracks and fire spreading east of the tracks.

Railroad traffic was halted for a few hours Friday because of the fire.

“It was huge. Flames were shooting up maybe 150 to 200 feet,” Ling said. “The heat was so intense, you couldn’t stay there for more than a few seconds.”

Cherie Frea, a Bee staffer who was heading home with her sons, said the flames appeared to tower over tall eucalyptus trees near the freeway. She was directed to exit at Herndon Avenue and was in one of the last vehicles that made it that far north before the northbound freeway traffic was diverted at Shaw Avenue.

Frea said ash from the fire bathed her vehicle “so thick that it stuck to the Yukon all the way back to our house.”

‘Amazing people lived’

Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea, who went with other county officials to Community Regional, said the most seriously injured victim suffered burns over 30% of his body. Burns were to his torso, legs, arms and hands, he said.

His injuries are critical, but he is expected to survive, Perea said.

“They can’t believe there weren’t any fatalities. If you saw the scene, it’s amazing people lived,” Perea said. “There’s a crater out there.”

Perea said the frontloader operator is an eight-year county worker in his late 30s or early 40s. He was sedated at the hospital early Friday evening.

Family members of injured inmates were waiting outside the Community Regional emergency department as access to the victims was limited.

Jose Flores, a chaplain at the Fresno County Jail, was outside the hospital Friday evening, ready to help “provide spiritual comfort to families who need it.”

Flores, Bible in hand, called the fire an “an awful accident.”

“I read them Scripture from God’s word,” he said, before accompanying more than 15 family members of an inmate who was about to undergo surgery inside the hospital. “We don’t have a lot of information ourselves.”

Mims said county workers and inmate crews typically work at the shooting range building up berms and doing basic maintenance.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. confirmed that the natural gas line that ruptured was a 12-inch transmission line. Utility workers were venting air from lines Friday night to maintain the gas supply to homes in the area of Herndon Avenue and Highway 99.

The gas was shut off as of 3:56 p.m., said PG&E spokesman Donald Cutler in San Francisco.

Cutler said the number of customers without service was not immediately known.

The Fresno Fire Department and PG&E are leading the investigation. It was not known how old the gas lines were and how deeply they were buried, Mims said.

John Navarrette, Fresno County administrative officer, said Cal-OSHA was notified “and they are responding to commence an investigation.”

The California Public Utilities Commission has sent a team to Fresno to assess the situation, said Terrie Prosper, director of the news and public information office.

“The immediate goal is to support and not hinder in any way the jobs of the first responders in making the area safe. The CPUC will conduct a full investigation of the explosion and has already coordinated with the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration,” Prosper said.

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