

Gas line was marked before tractor nicked it, igniting fireball near Highway 99

By Rory
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Motorists in northbound traffic on Highway 99 saw this fire and smoke cloud Friday afternoon. THEFRESNOBEE

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- *A natural gas line was clearly marked when a heavy equipment operator apparently nicked the line, sparking an explosion and fireball Friday near Highway 99.*
- *Six people injured in the explosion remain in the burn unit at Community Regional Medical Center — four in critical condition, two others in serious condition.*
- *A county official said workers are supposed to call PG&E when planning to work near utility lines, but the equipment operator was not expected to be working near the gas line at the Fresno County Sheriff's shooting range.*



A natural gas line was clearly marked when a heavy equipment operator apparently nicked the line, sparking an explosion and fireball Friday near Highway 99 that injured 13 people, officials with Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and Fresno County said Saturday.

PG&E spokesman Denny Boyles said the company routinely guides construction workers around gas and electric utilities, but the company was never notified that the county intended to dig near the 12-inch transmission line at the Fresno County Sheriff's Foundation gun range in northwest Fresno.

Fresno County Public Works Director Alan Weaver confirmed the county did not contact PG&E ahead of time, but said the county wasn't planning to do any digging near the line Friday.

Weaver said he had not yet seen the work order or spoken with the employee, who was among those critically injured in the blast. But he believes the county public works office did not call PG&E because someone believed the tractor driver was working on a nearby road, well away from the gas line, and did not warrant a call to the utility.

On Saturday, the shooting range was locked down as investigators with the California Public Utilities Commission examined the blast area to determine what happened and why. Boyles said PG&E was assisting the commission with its investigation. Separate investigations also are under way by the Fresno Fire Department, the Fresno County Sheriff's Office and the county public works department. Cal OSHA was at the scene Friday afternoon, Boyles said.

Community Regional Medical Center spokeswoman Mary Lisa Russell said six people who were injured in the blast, including the tractor driver and several Fresno County Jail inmates, were still being treated at the hospital on Saturday. Four of them are in critical condition, and two others suffered serious injuries. All were in the hospital's 10-room burn center.

Fresno County Sheriff's Department spokesman Tony Botti said Saturday that two people suffered minor injuries that

didn't warrant hospitalization, and 11 were sent to local hospitals. Both deputies and two inmates were released from the hospitals shortly after arriving, Botti said. One other inmate is in stable condition at Madera Community Hospital. Botti declined to identify the victims, but a relative identified the tractor driver as Ismael Areazola. The hospital confirmed that Areazola is among those in critical condition.

The explosion erupted at 2:28 p.m. Friday at the gun range, just east of the Highway 99 bridge over the San Joaquin River. Several deputies and a group of inmates who were picking up shell casings were at the range when the explosion occurred.

The blast prompted authorities to shut down northbound Highway 99 for several hours, and it caused extensive damage to Union Pacific's nearby railroad tracks.

Union Pacific spokesman Francisco Castillo said that 400 feet of track had to be replaced. Crews received clearance from the National Transportation Safety Board to work through the night, and freight train services resumed at 12:15 p.m. Saturday.

Castillo said that 10 trains were delayed. This backlog will take a while to erase, Castillo said, because trains will need to move slower than normal on the newly laid track.

A PUC spokeswoman had no immediate update Saturday on the status of the commission's investigation. Boyles said he would have no information on the exact cause of the explosion until the PUC's investigation concludes.

However, Boyles did offer some information on the scene itself and past gas line ruptures that shed some light on the incident.

The ruptured line was 40 inches deep at the point where it exploded, Boyles said. The line services only one industrial customer, which was not using it at the time of the explosion. No other PG&E customers were affected by the break. The company said the line was surveyed on foot on April 1 and no leaks were found.

PG&E said repairs could take two weeks. Repairs will begin once the PUC's investigation work at the scene has concluded. Company crews were flushing the broken gas line again Saturday, which could send a gas odor into nearby areas.

Boyles said that it is common for people to nick gas lines while digging or moving earth, but rare for them to explode in flames. For example, in March 2013 a contractor accidentally punched a gas line near Fashion Fair mall. The break shut down busy Shaw Avenue for nearly a day, but did not result in injuries. Boyles said Friday's gas line explosion was the only such incident to hurt someone in his five years with PG&E.

PG&E's natural gas operations have been under scrutiny since a fiery 2010 PG&E pipeline blast killed eight people in the San Francisco suburb of San Bruno. National Transportation Safety Board investigators blamed faulty safety practices by PG&E, and lax oversight by state regulators, for the 2010 blast.

At the firing range Saturday, Boyles pointed out several orange-and-white poles near the explosion site. Those are markers that indicate where the gas line is. The rupture took place in between two of the markers, which sit about 100 feet apart, Boyles said. Jeff Smith, another PG&E official, said the company held a safe-digging workshop with two Fresno County public works supervisors last November.

Botti, the sheriff's spokesman, said the heavy equipment operator was sub-contracted from the public works department to move dirt into a mound behind the gun range targets to catch bullets fired at the targets.

Weaver, the public works director, said all of the department's heavy equipment operators receive training on how to navigate around utility lines.

County protocol is for the office — not the driver — to make arrangements with the utility before any public works

project begins that deals with digging, Weaver said. He said he was unsure why the tractor operator was working near the gas line.

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