

Fresno County sheriff disputes account of what caused gun range fireball

By Marc Benjamin



Pacific Gas & Electric Co. released this photo of the area where the natural gas line was ruptured Friday.
PACIFIC GAS & ELECTRIC CO.

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Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims on Monday disputed accounts of what triggered Friday's fireball at the sheriff's gun range, saying the county equipment operator was smoothing dirt, not digging, near the PG&E natural gas line that ruptured.



More than a dozen people were injured — six of them severely burned — when a 12-inch natural gas line was ruptured and exploded in flames.



Over the weekend, officials with Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and Fresno County public works said the county heavy equipment operator apparently nicked the line while working on a berm that was designed to stop bullets at the shooting range operated by the Fresno County Sheriff's Foundation.

Mims, however, said the operator was using the front loader's bucket to spread piles of soil along the berm that captures bullets from the shooting range. She added that the loader is not a "digging piece of equipment" and was merely driving on the road near the berm when the gas line ruptured.

"We have no one saying anything was dug up or struck or nicked," Mims said. "That will be determined at the end of

the investigation.”

The blast is now being investigated by a host of agencies, including the Fresno County Sheriff’s Office, the California Public Utilities Commission, PG&E and Fresno Fire Department.

On Monday, PUC staff members were at the gun range just east of Highway 99 at the San Joaquin River in northwest Fresno.

PUC spokeswoman Terrie Prosper said the agency is examining the cause of the pipeline rupture and whether PG&E “violated any state or federal laws.”

She said the agency will not comment on particular scenarios that could have led to the explosion.

“Investigations typically include examining physical evidence, ensuring that physical evidence is properly secured, taking photographs, conducting interviews,” she said. “Regarding making a determination if the gas line was struck by the equipment, it depends on specifics of an incident.”

A metallurgic analysis of the pipe will “shed light on the cause of the failure.”

She also said that the nature of the explosion, physical evidence at the site and eyewitness reports will play a role in the investigation.

Meanwhile, PG&E spokesman Denny Boyles said the company has hired a firm to investigate the gas line explosion that injured members of an inmate work crew, two sheriff’s deputies and a county equipment operator.

Boyles confirmed that there was no call made to the national 8-1-1 utility call center to check if any gas lines were present before digging started.

The gas line serves a natural gas-powered plant in Chowchilla that produces electricity during times of peak demand. The plant was not operating on Friday at the time of the gas line explosion so nobody was without service, he said.

County officials were not answering questions about Friday’s explosion, deferring all questions to the Fresno County sheriff’s spokesman, Tony Botti, who issued a statement late Monday.

The inmate crew was working on a berm at the firing range that is used to stop bullets fired by target-shooting law enforcement officers.

Mims said county inmates typically are used at the shooting range to build up the berms and do other basic maintenance.

As of Monday afternoon, Botti said, six people remained hospitalized at Community Regional Medical Center — four of them in critical condition. The operator, identified by family as Ismael Areazola, is among those in critical condition with burns, as are three Fresno County Jail inmates. Two other inmates are in stable condition, he said.

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