

Transcript
09/02/10

Attorney General Martha Coakley: Good afternoon everybody. Attorney General Martha Coakley and with me starting on my right is Joe Rose, who is the president of the Propane Gas Association of New England. To my immediate right is the Fire Marshall of Massachusetts Steven Coan, thank you Steven. And to my left is Deputy, Detective Captain William Christiansen, with the State Police, who is here on behalf of Colonel Maryann McGovern. I'm gonna turn this over to the Fire Marshall Steven Coan but we are here because we felt that there is an issue of immediate concern, particularly in light of an upcoming holiday weekend about the certain amount of distribution of propane gas that's used in homes, used in barbeques, that's used in some machinery, but we wanted to alert the public to what we may believe, that what we believe is an issue right now. We just want to identify what we've done so far to isolate potential risks involved with the distribution of a certain amount of propane gas that did not include an odorant within it that is the factor in the gas that should there be a leak makes it more identifiable to the user. So with that I'm going to first ask the Fire Marshal to talk a little bit about that, and then I wanna update you on what we have been doing and the information that we've gotten so far. Steve

Fire Marshal Steve Coan: Thank you General. A Department of Fire Services investigation has uncovered the distribution of propane gas within the Commonwealth with insufficient odorant. We investigated the source of this gas through the distribution chain, which has led us to a major bulk distribution facility that has provided the insufficient odorant. Fire officials across the state and I are concerned about the lack of early warning should a propane leak occur because there is no way to detect it. Propane on its own does not have odor. It is another gas, called mercaptan, that is required to be added to both natural gas and propane gas that gives that rotten egg smell that we're all familiar with. First we believe the risk to individual consumers is low. The lack of odorant in of itself does not cause leaks. So for every propane source, when it is running properly, there is no danger. The odorant is simply, but importantly, an early warning sign to let people know that there is a leak. Lack of an odorant does not cause leaks. The propane is safe to use as long as it does not leak. The risk is that a leak would not be detected early. Keep in mind that not all propane in the Commonwealth is affected, only some. We have tracked the delivery chain to one large distribution facility, as I said, in the city of Westfield, in the western part of the state. That facility has about a hundred distributors that deliver directly to residential and commercial customers and to refilling stations. Propane distributors receive shipments from several large distributors and only once source, this one in Westfield, is affected.

Also only propane that has been delivered since May first from this particular source is involved. So to the consumer, if you've not had a delivery since May first, you have no reason to be concerned. Your local distributor may not be affected. The risk is low for customers that have received also only a partial fill up during the last ninety days. Meaning that if there was an installed tank that had fifty percent capacity and it was topped off then what you would have would be a less, less odor but you would still have

some odor present in that tank. The greater risk is for those new installations that are filled for the first time or those tanks that were totally empty. Affected distributors are in the process of contacting their customers to test the propane distribution tanks. The New England propane Gas Association has been very cooperative in helping us determine what mitigation steps can be taken and they are in the process of distributing information to their membership. In the next few days midlevel distributors will be contacting the retail distributors who will then start to contact their individual customers. As a result of my early findings, I sought the assistance and have received the assistance of the resource of the Attorney General and her staff. Her expertise, her staff's expertise in the area of investigation and consumer protection is greatly appreciated and drives this investigation forward from this point. Attorney General

AG Coakley: Thank you. And let me repeat a couple of things because we want to stress that we believe the risk is low particularly this does not increase the risk of leaks the lack of odorant all it does is make this particular propane not give an early warning signal. We have worked with the Secretary of Public Safety with the Governor and his team and with the Fire Marshal as you know Massachusetts is also preparing for the eventuality of Hurricane Earl. And we also believe that should people be more likely to use propane sources, particularly portable propane sources during this hurricane we wanted to make sure that people were aware that they should do that carefully. And the Fire marshal is going to talk a little more about that what consumers need to do and what they can do to be safe. I also want to stress that we're talking about propane gas, containerized gas, this does not apply to natural gas or natural gas lines. And again we know that consumers are aware that any use of propane has to be handled carefully. They should do it cautiously and we just want to stress that there's an additional caution here in the event that they have this containerized propane without the additional odorant. Let me tell you what we've done so far and what we're going to continue to do through the weekend into next week. The fire marshal indicated that we had a site in Westfield. It is a site that is a major, or a large distribution center for Massachusetts. It is operated by a company called DCP which is a limited liability partnership out of Colorado. We have been in touch with the counsel for DCP today, we have gotten their cooperation to date both to close down that site until we can ascertain that any of the gas that goes through it or from it is going to be safe that is containing the odorant and we believe they are continuing to cooperate with us both to get more information about where that propane may have been distributed with the goal obviously to rule in or out for ultimate consumers whether they should have a concern about their own propane. We were able to determine that from this large source there are essentially nineteen different companies with fifty six sites. I know the fire marshal talked about a hundred and we various numbers but we think we've narrowed it to about fifty six sites in Massachusetts.

And with the incredible help today of State Police assigned to the Attorney General's Office, with the help from the Colonel, and from Detective Captain Christiansen as well as the State Police assigned to the Fire Marshal's Office we have actually been able to visit each one of those sites. And the police served with those onsite to do testing of the current inventory of propane. Of those fifty six sites, only six indicated a problem that we've indentified, the problem of propane at this time that does not have the odorant in it.

Those have by and large voluntarily shut down, one or two that did not has been shut down. So we believe that we have located those sources at least today that had propane gas from Westfield. So that loop has been closed. What we are working on now obviously is the sources that received propane between may first and up until now may, and I stress, may have some of the propane that does not have the odorant it. We are going to continue to work with the company DCP Limited and we certainly appreciate and I'm gonna, after the Fire Marshal speaks, I want you to hear from Joe Rose because we've gotten incredible cooperation from the association and their members stressing the need for public safety. And they are a huge resource for us as we try and track who and who may not have this propane and what they can do about it. We are going to continue to work as a team with the Fire Marshal's office, with the Secretary of Public Safety, with the State Police and with the Association to provide information as we get it about where this propane may have been distributed. And I would ask the Fire Marshal now to talk a little bit about the cautions that we recommend for consumers keeping in mind that there are people that use portable tanks that they use at outdoor barbeques and people do use propane either outside or underground for their homes and for some commercial sites.

Steve Coan: Thank you General. I again would like to reiterate that we are talking propane, which is containerized gas, we are not talking the natural gas which comes from the pipeline to residential or commercial or industrial facilities'. But we are challenged by this and challenged by putting out a measured message. A message that does not cause panic and a message that raises the issue to the awareness to the level that it should. We are also challenged in the Commonwealth by Hurricane Earl. We know that if Hurricane Earl hits in the manner that we believe that it may, there will be long periods in areas of the state where power may be cut and people may need to turn to alternative cooking methods for several days. Many times, people turn to the use of propane and BBQ's as other alternative methods. So as a result, today I along with the Attorney General's Office have met with and informed, the Executive Board of the State Fire Chiefs Association so they are fully briefed and have sent an advisory in the past hour, sent an advisory to all fire chiefs across the state outlining the issue at hand and discussing the mitigation factors and strategies we have put in place. We are working together as a fire service to develop and continue to manage the immediate and short term and long range approaches to this issue.

In addition we have reason to believe that deliveries from the Westfield facility extended beyond the borders of Massachusetts. And that deliveries have gone to each of the 6 New England States and New York. As a result we conferenced this afternoon with my fellow Fire Marshalls from New England to give them information on what we know and to suggest and work with them on certain strategies so they are prepared to work with consumers in their states. We hope to send the message that people don't overburden their emergency responders. We are going to come into a tough 24-48 hour period. Fire Services is going to be severely challenged due to the storm. There is no easy way that your fire departments in your communities could get to each and every installation and have the type of equipment that could verify if there is a leaky propane cylinder. However, with that being said, as always, if people feel there is an immediate problem, if a situation has developed where they are at risk, it is very clear that individuals should

call 9-1-1. But again if there is no leak in the propane cylinder then the fact that there is no odorant does not affect the use of that propane and I reiterate that the lack of odorant does not increase the risk of a leak occurring.

We ask the public to use common sense and first find out if their propane was affected. Contact your local distributors and find out if your distributor is affected and again, you will hear from the industry who is helping us to get that message out. Exercise caution; fortunately we are not in our heating season right now, however the impending storm could cause some additional safety risk. If you use propane piped into your house for business, heating or cooking, there is nothing I suggest you do to determine if there is a leak. However there is a lot you can do to safely use propane and use that extra caution; do not smoke indoors or anywhere near propane fed appliances, if you have a power outage, use flashlights or battery operated candles instead of candles around propane appliances, do not use fireplaces or woodstoves as alternative heating sources as alternatives within close proximity to propane appliances, you can consider purchasing a gas detector, they cost about \$60 at big box stores, very important, I reiterate, do not attempt to inspect the system yourself, it could create a leak that was previously not there. Work with your local gas company, the distribution system will work to come to check the facilities as time moves on. If you have an LP gas grill tank, and most of us do, and again because of the storm, most of us will be using it over this holiday weekend, you can make sure that the connections are tight, use them outdoors only, even if we didn't have this issue before us, I would be standing before the public today because of the impending storm and saying the same, keep the connection tight, use outdoors, never bring a propane grill inside, keep that 10 feet away from a building, do not use on balconies above a first floor, it is illegal in Massachusetts. And in this case I would ask you to perform a leak test. And the way a leak test is performed is to spray the hose and connections with a soapy liquid solution. Bubbles indicate a potential leak. So you put the soapy material around each one of those connections and if you don't see bubbling there is a good assumption there is no leak to the system itself.

I conclude with this; please use good judgment, exercise the correct level of caution and concern. Get information; contact your distributors. Don't cause problems that don't exist by attempting to inspect your own system, call the professionals. And as always, if you think there is a serious problem, call 9-1-1.

AG Coakley: Thank you. Of course the advice that exists around using propane is always good advice no matter what and we just stress that in these circumstances we just recommend that you take caution. We are continuing to work through our Consumer Protection Division here, our Public Protection Bureau, around this as a consumer product safety issue. This is not the first time this has happened. There have been other instances in the country where this kind of distribution has occurred and we believe that as we alert the public to be cautious we will give you information both to keep safe in the short run, but to develop a long-term plan for identifying this and to make sure it does not happen again. It has been a pleasure to work with Joe Rose in the last several hours, it seems like longer (laughs) but we have been working really hard to try to get on top of this and try to get the appropriate information out. He has been extremely helpful as the

President of the Propane Gas Association of New England and he and his members have been working with us but also with the public and he is going to give you some information for people who want to get in touch for assistance. Thanks, Joe--.

Joe Rose: Thanks General. The Propane Gas Association has the number 1 priority of public safety. The product that we sell is very useful, but obviously, the nature of that use makes it require the need for caution while it is being used.

There are three steps I really want to mention. First and foremost, while today all the facilities in Massachusetts have been inspected, facilities in other states started to be inspected and they will all be completely inspected before any trucks roll tomorrow morning. That provides the snapshots in time in the other states as well. During the day tomorrow all of the dispensing tanks that refill BBQ cylinders will be inspected to make sure the gas in those tanks is correctly odorized. Thirdly, our members, and we have 560 members throughout the 6 state region will start to inspect and test consumer tanks prioritizing on the ones as the Marshall said earlier that were newly installed or have run out of gas for some reason. The last thing is that in for consumers that have concerns or want information we have a website: www.pgane.org and we have set up a toll free number 1-888-445-1075 and if you have questions that is the Office of the Propane Gas Association of New England those calls will all be forwarded to me and I will respond to your call and answer your question. Our industries work diligently with the Marshalls Office, with the Attorney General's Office we are trying to get our arms around this problem so that our customers are safe and comfortable using this product.

AG Coakley: Thank You.