

“Tabletop” Exercise Looks at Gas Well Site Emergencies

This column is presented weekly by the Public Education sub-committee of the Clinton County Natural Gas Task Force in an effort to provide accurate, up-to-date information on activities surrounding the Marcellus Shale formation and the natural gas exploration industry. For more information on Task Force activities, visit the Task Force page on the Clinton County government website at www.clintoncountypa.com.

As exploration for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale continues across the Commonwealth, Clinton County continues to feel the effects of this growing industry. There are many discussions from among people in various walks of life on the number of potential impacts we could experience from the gas industry. Those thoughts are also on the minds of public safety professionals here in Clinton County.

On the evening of June 16, 2011, in a cooperative effort between long-time local business Croda Inc., as well as natural gas company Anadarko Petroleum and the Clinton County Department of Emergency Services, several local emergency service organizations and representatives from the gas industry gathered in a conference room at Croda Inc. to take initial steps in being prepared to respond should an emergency occur at a well site.

This gathering of emergency responders and industry representatives is referred to as a “Tabletop” exercise. Essentially, a Tabletop exercise is an opportunity for responders and industry professionals to gather in a stress-free environment and discuss a given scenario associated with an emergency or hazardous situation.

In all, about 43 people participated, including local fire and emergency medical services responders, as well as representatives from the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA). Croda has the meeting room facilities available and generously loaned us space for the exercise. County Emergency Services and Anadarko representatives guided the event.

The scenario presented for the exercise was “a fire in progress at a well site with injured and unaccounted for gas company personnel.” As industry and emergency services professionals engaged in conversation regarding the situation they had been presented with, a common theme that crops up in most emergency situations was becoming apparent: “COMMUNICATION.” Not the use of radio equipment or telephone equipment, but the open dialog and exchange of information to learn and understand each other’s role and responsibility during an emergency at a gas well.

The benefit of such exercises is that they get everyone talking ahead of time so that, if a situation occurs at, for instance, three o’clock in the morning, that’s not the first time our emergency services personnel and the folks from Anadarko are talking to each other. You can’t just run right into an emergency situation – you really need the ability to talk with the industry representatives to try and understand what’s going on, and determine what you can do, what you can touch, and what you cannot do and what you cannot touch.

While engaged in the exercise process it was interesting to note, when an emergency occurs at a well site and is going to require the involvement of local public safety responders, industry and the response community share the same objectives of ensuring life safety and the reduction of damage to property and the environment. Furthermore, industry and public safety officials both have a structure of command and control for emergencies, but differ slightly in the tactics they may use to control a situation. While these two groups of players have similarities, the challenge comes in the need to have common ground in achieving the goal of insuring personal safety and reducing impact to property and the environment.

While there have been introductions and initial conversations with the gas industry, the Tabletop Exercise was a good step forward in being prepared to meet these goals in the event of an emergency at a well site.

Having worked through the Tabletop Exercise process, it would be fair to say industry learned as much about public safety in Clinton County as public safety learned about the gas industry. Taking the time to meet and talk in a controlled environment to learn who the various players are was a positive step in establishing professional relations between the gas industry and the public safety sector here in Clinton County.

With the natural gas industry continuing to grow in our community, an initial step has been taken in developing a professional relationship. As industry expands it will be important to continue the growth of this professional relationship in order to be certain our emergency responders are prepared and well versed in the necessary actions that would need to be taken should there be an emergency at a well site. Our hope is that, continuing to work with companies like Anadarko, we will be able to develop an on-site exercise so our responders can physically respond to a well site and get a feel for what takes place there.

It is a goal of the Clinton County Natural Gas Task Force's Public Safety Committee to work with industry in expanding our emergency responder's knowledge of the natural gas industry by working collaboratively with the industry to develop and provide additional training and educational opportunities here locally.

For those who were involved in the initial exercise, you are to be commended for taking the time to participate. Regardless of your affiliation, this exercise showed a desire and interest for our public safety officials and the gas industry to take the necessary steps to be prepared in the event an emergency situation should occur at well site.

Kevin Fanning is the director of the Clinton County Department of Emergency Services and also serves as chairperson of the Clinton County Natural Gas Task Force's Public Safety Committee.

