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For More Information Contact:

Kenneth Clarkson
Communications Director
kenneth@pstrust.org
360-543-5686 x104

Worker Dies in Fire near Mobile Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Facilities in Toppenish, WA. - Cause Still Under Investigation

The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) and Cascade Natural Gas are investigating an incident that occurred when a Sapphire Gas Solutions employee died of burns following a blaze that ignited next to mobile LNG facilities in rural Washington State.

The incident prompts the question: are mobile LNG facilities sufficiently regulated?

BELLINGHAM, Washington [Oct. 6, 2023] – A man is dead following a devastating fire in Toppenish, WA on Sept. 22. The unidentified employee of Texas-based company Sapphire Gas Solutions succumbed to intense burns following transport to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. Multiple regulatory agencies and Washington-based Cascade Natural Gas are currently investigating the incident. At this time, no cause has been released.

In addition to the fire, an explosion was reported in the area, prompting an evacuation radius to be set up within a half-mile of the incident, an area that included Toppenish Middle School, which was evacuated.

First responders reported finding a pickup truck ablaze on the side of the road next to multiple mobile LNG facilities, which are trailers loaded with highly-flammable LNG. Emergency personnel later confirmed the reach of the fire struck one of the trailers.

After emergency personnel extinguished the fire, crews from Cascade Natural Gas began their investigation of the scene. At this time, Cascade has confirmed that its product, the LNG stored within eight different trailers, was “stable and secure.”

Background and Analysis

As investigators work to identify the incident's cause, Pipeline Safety Trust (PST) decided it was important to look at current federal regulations for "mobile LNG facilities" to determine what kind of regulations are in place, if any, and if they are enough.

What is liquified natural gas (LNG)?

First things first, what is liquified natural gas or LNG? LNG is natural gas that has been refrigerated until it reaches a liquid form that can later be regasified to use in a variety of different facilities. The main reason companies liquify natural gas is its dense phase makes it easier to transport larger quantities to areas that are normally inaccessible via pipeline transport.

What are Mobile and Temporary LNG Facilities?

Both the transport and use of LNG differ depending on the facility, when it comes to mobile LNG facilities, LNG is delivered by a tanker truck to satellite plants. After transport, the tanker truck then dispenses the LNG into storage tanks at what is known as either a "starter station or containerized station." Following storage, the LNG can be accessed, regasified, and then injected into companies' natural gas distribution systems to help in times of high demand, a process also known as peak-shaving.

Generally, mobile LNG facilities are utilized in two main scenarios: peak-shaving applications and when a company's natural gas pipeline system needs repair.

What are the regulations for Mobile LNG Facilities?

The sole federal regulations for Mobile and Temporary LNG Facilities are provided below.

49 C.F.R. § 193.2019 Mobile and temporary LNG facilities.

(a) Mobile and temporary LNG facilities for peak-shaving application, for service maintenance during gas pipeline systems repair/alteration, or for other short-term applications need not meet the requirements of this part if the facilities are in compliance with applicable sections of NFPA-59A-2001 (incorporated by reference, see § 193.2013).

(b) The State agency having jurisdiction over pipeline safety in the State in which the portable LNG equipment is to be located must be provided with a location description for the installation at least 2 weeks in advance, including to the extent practical, the details of siting, leakage containment or control, firefighting

equipment, and methods employed to restrict public access, except that in the case of emergency where such notice is not possible, as much advance notice as possible must be provided.

In layman's terms, the above regulation says that mobile LNG facilities whose operations consist of the following: peak-shaving, service maintenance during short term applications, and other "short-term applications," only need to adhere to a National Fire Protection Association Standard from 2001, and do not have to comply with other federal regulations for LNG facilities as listed in 49 C.F.R. Part 193.

From the Pipeline Safety Trust's perspective, it seems that the regulation of mobile LNG facilities is inadequate and more must be done to make them safer. PST would like to start a dialogue about which portions of Part 193 might be appropriate for mobile LNG facilities compliance to prevent future, similar tragedies.

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About Pipeline Safety Trust: The Pipeline Safety Trust is a nonprofit public watchdog promoting pipeline safety through education and advocacy by increasing access to information, and by building partnerships with residents, safety advocates, government and industry, that result in safer communities and a healthier environment.