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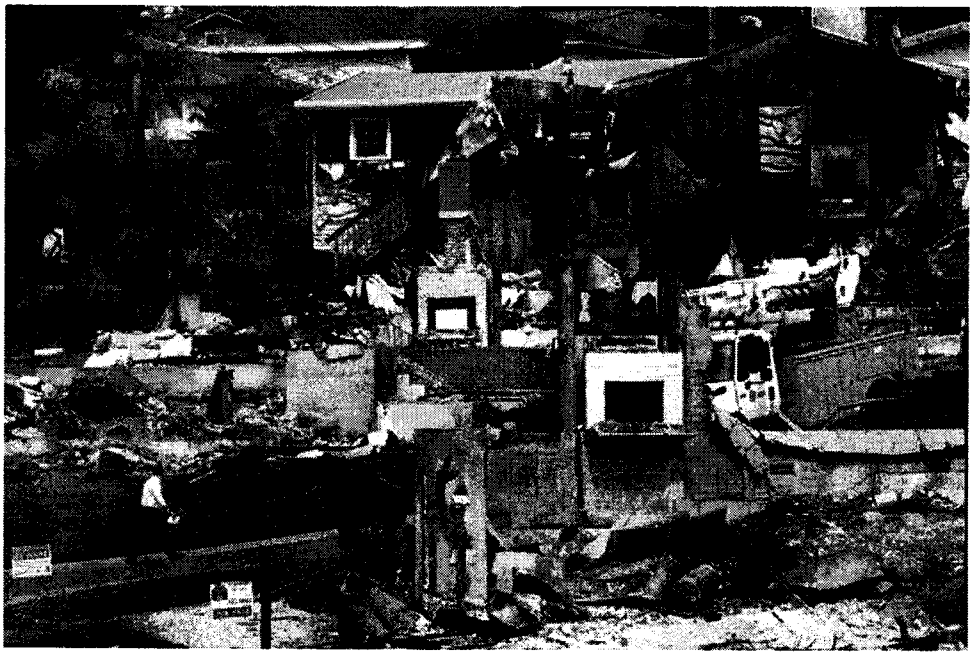
Calls for Action Emerge After Gas Explosion

By REBECCA SMITH And STU WOO



Associated Press

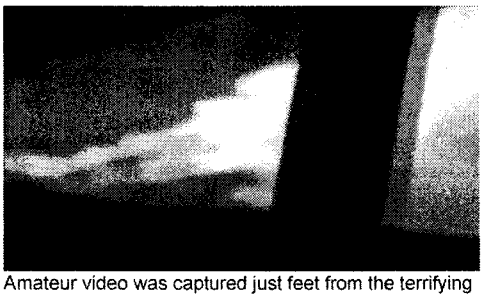
The damage in San Bruno, Calif., on Monday. 'Often, it takes an incident like this one to force change,' said a former top pipeline regulator.

SAN BRUNO, Calif.—As more residents trickled back to the neighborhood scarred by last week's gas-pipeline explosion here, a former federal safety chief called for new rules to separate residences from pipelines, while a California lawmaker sought federal hearings on the accident.

City officials said Monday the confirmed death toll from the Sept. 9 blast remained at four, but the coroner's office was examining skeletal remains found at the site to determine if they were human. The officials said four people were still missing from the explosion of a 30-inch-diameter PG&E Corp. pipe that ran through the town.

Brigham McCown, the former head of the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, the federal pipeline regulator, in an interview called for creation of a national commission to examine the problem of high-pressure fuel pipelines that pass through residential areas, as well as near schools and other public facilities. Many neighborhoods around the nation are built near pipelines.

"Often, it takes an incident like this one to force change," said Mr. McCown, a Dallas lawyer with the firm of Langley Weinstein



Amateur video was captured just feet from the terrifying San Bruno fireball. Video courtesy of Fox News.

LLP in Dallas who left the agency in 2007 and now represents pipeline companies in private practice. One possibility, he said, is to create "a no man's land around some of these pipelines or restrict lines of certain sizes from neighborhoods."

That would make the pipeline industry similar to the electric industry, which puts its highest voltage power lines in separate rights of way with large buffers to houses and other structures.

Following an emotional, closed-door meeting Monday with residents who lost their homes, Rep. Jackie Speier, a Democrat who represents the San Francisco Peninsula area in Congress, called for hearings on the blast. "We're going to have to demand additional rules," she said. "Most of the people here didn't even know there was a pipeline near them."

Meanwhile, California Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein urged federal inspections of intrastate gas pipelines in California—with a priority on those near residential areas. In addition, the state Public Utilities Commission on Monday ordered PG&E to develop a plan for a safety inspection of its entire gas-transmission pipeline system by Sept. 23.

PG&E also said Monday it was setting aside up to $100 million in a relief fund to compensate residents and city facilities in San Bruno. It said the fund wouldn't cover claims for personal injury or wrongful death.

Christopher Hart, vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, said Monday that federal investigators finished the explosion's on-site examination. He said the investigation was moving onto the next phase, which includes looking at pipeline documents, visiting the pipeline's control and monitor sites, interviewing PG&E employees and other witnesses, and reviewing seismic activity in the area.

San Bruno city manager Connie Jackson said the city in 2008 or early 2009 completed a sewer project in the neighborhood designed to address capacity and overflow issues. Investigators are examining whether that affected the pipeline. The NTSB's Mr. Hart said there was no visible evidence that nearby sewer and water lines damaged the gas line.

City officials also said they would take residents of the 58 destroyed or uninhabitable houses on bus tours of the neighborhood Monday and Tuesday because it was still too dangerous to venture in alone. Most residents of the roughly 300 houses with little or no damage returned home Sunday.

Responding to reports that some residents had complained of gas odors before the explosion, PG&E spokesman Brian Swanson said the company found only two minor complaints after researching 95% of customer call-records dating to July 1.

On Fairmont Drive, neighbors pulled into their driveways and hugged each other. They compared how the heat from the flames warped car bumpers and house gutters.

"It's better than I expected," said Jadwindar Singh, 30 years old, after he emerged from his split-level house. The heat broke two side windows and cracked his Toyota Corolla's windshield. Everything else, including the backyard wooden slide and swing set for his one-year-old son, Nishaan, was intact. That wasn't the case three homes downhill, beyond the police barricade. For more than a block houseless chimneys stood alone, towering over a sea of ash. "It's just overwhelming," Mr. Singh said as he videotaped the destruction. "It's just so close, and I have to see it everyday. Just four houses down, everything is gone."



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Hugs before a meeting on Monday for residents whose houses were affected by the blast.

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Mr. McCown, the former regulator, said federal officials have been concerned for years about urban encroachment on large, aging pipeline routes but said they haven't addressed it because the lines typically are buried and they felt any danger was controllable through proper pipeline maintenance.

He said a national commission should look at whether setback requirements should be created, especially for new pipelines going through land that may one day be developed, or rules to keep transmission pipeline sizes in neighborhoods smaller or less pressurized.

Current pipeline safety officials couldn't be reached for comment.

Julie Halligan, head of the Consumer Protection and Safety Division of the California Public Utilities Commission, said Mr. McCown's commission suggestion was worth serious consideration. "More and more, people are going to be close to these lines," she said. "It's a valid question" if that's wise, she said.

The San Bruno blast took out a large section of a line that was laid before most homes in the area were built. Fire officials said the utility had some difficulty turning off gas because it had manual shutoff valves. Current technology allows utilities to put valves on pipes that automatically close if there are pressure changes, earthquakes or other threats to pipeline integrity.

The pipeline safety administration has categorized pipelines by proximity to populated areas and gave pipeline companies eight years until 2012 to do inspections and make needed repairs. Of the 21,764 miles of pipeline near "high-consequence areas" such as homes or public facilities, nearly 20,000 miles had been inspected by the end of 2009, the pipeline administration said.It isn't easy for people to find out whether there are gas pipelines near their homes or whether they have been inspected. Following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, federal officials have removed many maps of critical infrastructure, including gas pipelines, from publicly accessible databases.

—Cassandra Sweet contributed to this article.

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