

Tioga County EMS and Fire Prepare for Gas Drilling

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Last Thursday, the steering committee of Tioga Investigates Natural Gas (TING) discussed the future needs of EMS and fire fighters once gas drilling commences in earnest. Dick LeCount, director of Tioga County's Emergency Management Office, and John Scott, Tioga County Fire Coordinator, presented information they gathered during a recent fact-finding mission in Bradford County, PA.

Scott began with an overview of risk assessment. According to the Bradford County 911 coordinator there were only 3 - 4 EMS (emergency medical services) calls over the past six months that were directly related to gas drilling activities and no fire or "hazmat" (hazardous materials) calls reported.

"This is a different risk factor than what is portrayed in the west," Scott said. Most western drilling pads have pits for storing used frack water while many of the wells in this region place the wastewater in tanks. However, those tanks need to be transported to disposal facilities, and the Southern Tier is hilly terrain. Scott also noted that there are at least 89 gas wells owned by Chesapeake and many more in Bradford County. However, because of the way different agencies respond to accident reports, the EMS calls don't reflect the total number of incidents.

Scott said that two spill calls were reported directly to the PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). One was an acid spill and the other a chemical spill. Those were cleaned up by the gas company with oversight by the state DEP, Scott explained.

Both Scott and LeCount would expect to see a similar number of calls and accidents here, although Scott said the Bradford County numbers may be a little low. Given the terrain in Tioga County, Scott thinks there will be more accidents in the winter due to heavy trucks and winter driving hazards.

Fire Protection

Based on information from Bradford County, Scott believes there won't be a significant increase in fire department activity. But, he cautioned, any call will probably include a hazmat component because of the nature of the drilling industry.

Scott reported that a consortium of pipeline companies currently provides annual training to NY firefighters. In addition to that, gas companies offer training for local fire companies.

"But," Scott said, "I would like to see a requirement that each gas company meet with local fire and EMS before drilling." He would also like each drilling company to complete a fire and safety plan for each drilling site, and suggested that if this is not currently required that towns create a local law requiring such a plan.

Each drilling site needs to be assigned a unique 911 address as well. “One of the biggest problems in Bradford County is getting the location when there is a problem at the site,” Scott said. So far Fortuna has been very good about providing drilling site locations to the emergency crews in this area, but Scott wants this to be a standard operating procedure. A 911 address could easily be tied in with industrial driveway permits and exact coordinates for each site.

Sometimes the problem isn't the location, but the logistics of reaching the drilling site. LeCount related an incident from earlier in the summer when Candor firefighters responded to a call at Fortuna's well off Southwick Hill. The company was restoring the area and planned to spread hay after re-seeding the area, but a fire started in the hay trailer.

“The road is a seasonal road, and it was hard for the fire crew to respond to that location,” LeCount said. Not only was the road overgrown with weeds, but the truck traffic to and from the drilling site had left the road in such terrible condition that fire trucks had difficulty navigating the ruts.

Emergency Medical Responders

Given the number of gas wells expected over the next ten years, Scott said the EMS system will be “taxed” to provide the necessary services. The biggest issue will be providing advanced life support (ALS) for the type of accidents that could be expected from industrial gas development.

Looking at the number of wells in Bradford County, and understanding that drilling is an activity that goes on 24-hours-a-day, Scott estimated that Tioga County will need at least seven ALS medics to provide adequate response.

“This is not cheap,” Scott cautioned. An individual “flycar” – a specially adapted car that carries all the medicines and supplies – would require at least \$40,000 in cabinetry to support this type of need. On top of that he calculated at least \$62,000 per medic to provide round-the-clock coverage for the county.

It takes years to train people for this type of emergency work, Scott said. If the gas companies begin drilling early next year, the county would have to hire people and that costs money.

Both Scott and members of TING feel that the costs for increased emergency services should be borne by the drilling industry. “There is a precedent for host agreements to help communities supply the emergency medical services needed,” said TING member Elaine Jardine. In those agreements the municipalities put forth what they need to do to provide the services and the companies pay for it. Scott pointed out that in Sublette County, Wyoming the EMS service built an ambulance garage closer to the gas wells so that EMTs could respond faster.

Although there is little drilling activity going on right now, Tioga County emergency responders are involved in training scenarios related to gas activities. On Saturday morning, August 29 the Tioga County hazmat team gathered at the Waverly Fire Station to respond to a simulation of a chemical spill in Sayre.

“Our county has a tremendous asset in the hazmat team,” Scott said. The team belongs to a consortium of nine counties that includes Tioga, Chemung and Tompkins. In Saturday’s training simulation the team acted in the capacity of supporting “mutual aid” for Sayre.