



Gates Mills Fire Department

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Health and Safety Concerns at Urban Area Gas/Oil Well Sites

Since the enactment of Ohio House Bill (H.B.) #278 in 2004, the Gates Mills Fire Department has responded to thirty-four (34) incidents involving Urban Area Gas Wells. H.B. #278 permitted drilling in more densely populated areas. This law has resulted in placing these facilities in close proximity to homes, businesses, schools, other inhabited structures, and people.

Many of the responses made by this fire department involved situations where there was no hazard or danger to the public or our emergency responders. However, some of the responses involved large, high pressure (2,000 psi) gas leaks and spills involving approximately 400 to 500 gallons of oil.

While no one can predict with any certainty whether a Gas/Oil Well will develop a leak or catastrophic failure during its years of production, locating this equipment in urbanized areas presents an increased risk to people and property.

In 2010 H.B. #278 was revised. While Substitute Senate Bill #165 addressed many issues, vital improvements to both Health and Safety such as atmospheric monitoring, remote shut-off controls, and mandatory inspections were not included in this legislation.

During the normal operation of Gas/Oil Well equipment, venting of flammable and toxic gases occurs. When a malfunction or leak takes place, larger amounts of these gases are released. Exactly which gases and in what concentration is not known, posing a health and safety hazard to the public and emergency responders.

Often when a large leak/release of gas occurs, the most appropriate action is to shut-off the Gas/Oil Well. In incidents involving the Wellhead the shut-off valves are located within the same enclosure. If remote shut-off and monitoring equipment is used, these hazardous situations can be detected and controlled, thereby reducing the exposure to the public and our emergency responders.

Under the current law, there is no requirement for inspections of these facilities. In the past, these facilities were located in rural less populated areas. Leaks and malfunctions were found by Well company workers posing little exposure hazard to the public. Now the public is the first to be exposed to these hazards. A mandatory inspection program for Urban Area Gas/Oil Wells would reduce the risk for both the public and our emergency responders.

Urban Area Gas/Oil Wells continue to pose an increased risk from flammable/toxic gases, leaks involving oil and other contaminants that threaten the environment, and from possible fires/explosions at these facilities located near homes and members of the public. We must continue to push for legislation that will improve the Health and Safety of our Community, emergency responders, and the environment.

P. Thomas Robinson, Fire Chief

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