

Gas Department's Goal: Protect Life, Then Property

The ultimate responsibility of Rock Energy Cooperative's Natural Gas Department is to protect the public from the dangers of the gas, Natural Gas Superintendent Randy Gant believes.

The mission includes ensuring the safe construction, operation, and maintenance of the natural gas distribution system in the co-op's service territory. That mission is accomplished through education, inspection, enforcement, and investigation of incidents and accidents.

Gant is adamant when he talks about the co-op's responsibility during a natural gas emergency: "Protect life, then property."

Employees of the natural gas department met last month with about 40 members of the Harlem-Roscoe Fire Department as part of the co-op's public awareness program. Firefighters and the co-op share the common goal of protecting life and property, Gant said.

"Natural gas is one of the safest and most reliable forms of energy," he said. "By understanding potential dangers and working together to deal with them correctly, co-op employees and firefighters can help make everyone safer."

Gant told the group about a natural gas explosion near Boston in November that injured 20 people and damaged 42 buildings. The incident has been in the news and is a reminder of how dangerous natural gas can be.

When Rock Energy Cooperative employees are investigating the source of an outdoor gas leak, they always call 811 so utilities can be properly marked, Gant said. The national 811 number was created to prevent people from unintentionally hitting underground utility lines while digging.



Natural Gas Superintendent Randy Gant demonstrates what can happen when natural gas builds up inside a home.

The lines are generally marked within two hours when a utility calls in an emergency locate. During that time, co-op employees continue looking for the source of the leak without digging. They also alert neighbors that a natural gas leak is being investigated.

"It's easy for a worker to get into the find-and-fix syndrome, where they quickly try to find the problem and fix it," Gant said. "But that can turn a minor gas leak into a major problem."

In an effort to find the problem, a worker could accidentally puncture a natural gas pipeline, which might cause gas to enter nearby buildings and potentially lead to an explosion, he said. Electric lines and other utilities also are buried underground and might be compromised by any

premature digging.

If co-op workers are responding to a dig-in where a natural gas line has been ruptured, they will make sure that someone has called 911 and quickly work to evacuate nearby buildings to ensure everyone's safety.

Gant told firefighters to always contact the co-op when the department is called for an incident involving natural gas. Workers will locate the source of the problem, make necessary repairs, and restore the natural gas system to its normal operation.

"But remember that our first priority is to protect life and then property," he said.

