

Propane issue leads Placer County to issue public safety declaration

Placer County Executive Officer Thomas Miller on Thursday signed an order declaring the presence of propane leaks beneath significant snowpack at numerous sites a threat to public safety. This order encompasses not only the Serene Lakes subdivision area near Donner Summit, but other eastern Placer County communities.

The order authorizes the director of Environmental Health to notify landowners to abate leaking propane systems expeditiously. The notices, which started going out April 14 to individual property owners, seek the owner's cooperation with the abatement.

Abatement options and deadlines to respond will be identified in the notice and will be based on the county's assessment of the level of safety risk posed by that particular owner's propane tank system leak. Should the property owner not respond to the notice, or choose not to proceed to abate in accordance with the notice, the CEO's order authorizes the county to gain entry onto the property to abate the leak first through owner permission, and if that fails, through the court.

If the county must abate the leak, the county will seek reimbursement from the property owner of all costs of abatement at a later date and possibly lien the property.

The Board of Supervisors on April 11 ratified a proclamation of local emergency.

A voluntary evacuation order is in place for the Serene Lakes community and will remain in place until further notice.

Placer County Sheriff's Office will maintain a presence in the Serene Lakes for the duration of the evacuation.

An extraordinary snowfall this season has left propane tanks buried under dozens of feet of snow. The tremendous weight of the snow has caused the plumbing – valves, regulators and piping – that connects the supply tanks to the houses to break and leak. Leaking propane is believed responsible for an explosion on April 8 that demolished an unoccupied three-story cabin in Serene Lakes. That blast sent debris flying hundreds of feet.

Additionally, there have been more than two dozen homes in the development that have been affected by leaking propane.