

Blue Racer Midstream Natrium Natural Gas Plant Explosion and Fire

Incident Overview

An explosion and active fire broke out at the Blue Racer Midstream Natrium Natural Gas Processing and Fractionation Facility, co-owned and operated by Dominion Transmission and Caiman Energy II, in Marshall County, West Virginia after 1 a.m. on Saturday, September 21 2013.¹

The blast was felt miles away and the fire was seen across the Ohio River in Clarington.² The cause of the accident has not been made public and the plant remains out of service as of January 13, 2014.³

The fire was reported to be contained by 8 a.m. It can be estimated that the fire burned for at least 6 and half hours. Nearby state Route 2 was also closed for several hours.⁴ In addition, CSX rail transportation was shut down as fire crews worked to extinguish the blaze.³ Dominion spokesman Dan Donovan said there was no threat to the public — no one was injured, and all personnel were accounted for.²



Local Communities at Risk

According to Ray Seech, Director of Natural Gas Liquids operations for Blue Racer Midstream, in case of an accident, Dominion's plan is to have Marshall County Emergency Management and the State Police notify residents to evacuate. He noted, "Safety is our core value, for the public and employees and any person in the area."⁵ Yet, Dominion did not have an emergency warning system in place for local residents at the time of explosion.

Twenty-five residents of the Kent, WV, located within a mile from the plant, were evacuated for about two hours. However, by the time State Police officer arrived in the community, most residents had already evacuated themselves.

Kent resident Delbert Wade said "Dominion met with the community about a year ago and assured residents there was no reason to be concerned about the plant's activities, but said they didn't have a warning system in place yet." Dominion never followed up after the meeting. In contrast, previous site operator, PPG Industries, did have a pole with buzzer that emitted a loud blast in case of an accident, with three blasts signaling evacuation.

"We don't feel safe," Wade said. "None of us do. We are a relaxed community and we've lived here for 50 years and it's been home to us. We are afraid to go to bed at night and everybody I talk to wants to sell out and relocate. Our safety doesn't seem to be a concern."

On January 15, 2014, almost four months after the explosion, Dominion announced an internal and external alarm system has been activated on test basis.⁶

Another resident Lorri Davisson called the incident "a terrifying experience. It looked like the whole valley was exploding. The whole sky was orange and it sounded like landing airplanes." Davisson said she and her family could feel the heat from the fire when they fled their home.⁵

William and Sandra Cody, who own and operate E&M's Dayshift Cafe, located just a few hundred yards north of the Blue Racer Midstream plant, believes the plant is located too close to Kent residents. They asked plant officials if their cafe and home are located in "a safe distance" from the plant but they never received an answer.⁶

Across the Ohio River, Fire Chief of the Clarington Volunteer Fire Department, Jim Hunt, recalled the blast "rattled homes miles away and lit the night sky a deep orange, officials said, but there were no injuries. It woke us up. It shook the house, I thought maybe the house next to us or two doors (blew) up. And then I see an orange flame. We had people call us three or four miles away because they felt it, they thought downtown (Clarington) had blown up."²

Watch a short recording⁷ of the accident taken from across the river in Clarington, Ohio:



Cause of Explosion and Fire Remains Uncertain

Since the incident of September 21st, the Blue Racer Midstream plant remains out of service. Spokeswoman Casey Nikoloric told local West Virginia newspaper *The Intelligencer and Wheeling News-Register* on January 13, 2014, "We have not restarted the Natrium plant, we are making the repairs needed to restore service."³ State regulators are still working with Dominion officials to determine why the natural gas processing plant blew up and burned.

Natrium Plant Safety Concerns

The Dominion gas plant explosion and fire came only a few months after the plant began its operation in June, 2013.⁸

In Aug 2011, Dominion declared that "Natrium will be a world class facility." Paul Ruppert, senior vice president of Dominion Transmission, assured, "It is being constructed to the latest industry standards to be an extremely reliable plant, which should be appealing to producers looking to capture the greatest value. Dominion has 100 years of experience in operating processing plants, has a proven track record and understands this business".⁹

Long before the September blast, officials with the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection expressed concerns over flaring at the Natrium plant.¹⁰ However, DEP has no official authority beyond issuing the flaring permit. Department spokeswoman Kathy Cosco said the flaring is used to burn off volatile gases to help avoid possible explosions. The plant maintains a flaring permit.

About Natrium Processing and Fractionation Facility



According to Dominion's website, the Natrium Processing and Fractionation Facility is part of a \$1.5 billion joint venture between Dominion and Caiman Energy II, LLC, known as Blue Racer Midstream. The natural gas processing plant is located along the Ohio River near Natrium, West Virginia, covering 3 million square feet.¹¹ Due to further development of fracking in the Marcellus and Utica shale formations, additional natural gas processing and fractionation capacity was necessary. The Natrium site is said to be near Dominion's existing facilities, natural gas development areas, highways, rail and the Ohio River.⁹ The facility was liquefying up to 200 million cubic feet of natural gas per day.

The Proposed Dominion Cove Point LNG Exporting Terminal requires new liquefaction facilities to be built on-site in Lusby, MD. These facilities are designed to process an average of 750 million cubic feet of natural gas per day.¹² The Natrium Plant is only a quarter of Cove Point's capacity. An explosion and fire at Cove Point would have a much greater impact for Southern Calvert County and could be potentially catastrophic.

¹ "Crews battle fire at Dominion Plant." *NEWS9*. 21 Sept. 2013. Web. <http://www.wtov9.com/news/features/marshall-county/stories/crews-battle-fire-at-dominion-plant-59.shtml>

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- ² Chris Togneri. "Spokesman: No one injured after explosion, fire at Natrium plant in West Virginia ." *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*. 21 Sept. 2013. Web. <http://triblive.com/news/adminpage/4746185-74/fire-spokesman-company#axzz2q8ZGEMYF>
- ³ Casey Junkins. "Plant Remains Closed." *The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register*. 13 Jan. 2014. Web. <http://www.theintelligencer.net/page/content.detail/id/594524/Plant-Remains-Closed.html>
- ⁴ "Overnight fire at Dominoin Plant." *NEWS9*. 21 Sept. 2013. Web. <http://www.wtov9.com/news/features/marshall-county/stories/overnight-fire-at-dominion-plant-60.shtml>
- ⁵ Sarah Harmon. "Kent Residents: 'We Evacuated Ourselves'" *The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register*. 29 Sept. 2013. Web. <http://www.theintelligencer.net/page/content.detail/id/590438/Kent-Residents---We-Evacuated-Ourselves-.html?nav=515>
- ⁶ Scott McCloskey. "Neighbors React to Blue Racer Siren." *The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register*. 13 Jan. 2014. Web. <http://www.theintelligencer.net/page/content.detail/id/594627/Blue-Racer-story-goes-here.html?nav=515>
- ⁷ Jason Chambers. "Accident at the Dominion gas plant (Blue Racer Midstream), natrium, near Kent, WV." *Youtube*. 24 Sept. 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yzuDrhz688>
- ⁸ Bob Downing. "Blue Racer Midstream's Natrium plant in West Virginia is finally operating" *Akron Bean Journal Online*. 04 July. 2013. Web. <http://www.ohio.com/news/local/blue-racer-midstream-s-natrium-plant-in-west-virginia-is-finally-operating-1.410765>
- ⁹ "Dominion to Begin Construction on New Natural Gas Processing, Liquids Separation Facility." *Dominion News*. 04 Aug. 2011. Web. <http://dom.mediaroom.com/index.php?s=26677&item=71816>
- ¹⁰ Casey Junkins. "Gas Cut off as Probe Goes On." *The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register*. 02 Oct. 2013. Web. <http://www.theintelligencer.net/page/content.detail/id/590551/Gas-Cut-off-as-Probe-Goes-On.html?nav=510>
- ¹¹ "Natrium Processing and Fractionation Facility." Web. <https://www.dom.com/business/gas-transmission/natrium/>
- ¹² "Dominion Cove Point" <https://www.dom.com/business/gas-transmission/cove-point/index.jsp>