

Firefighters train for gas well blaze

Practice Run

Firefighters from around the county are learning how to fight potential natural gas well fires.

Twenty volunteer firefighters from seven fire departments were in attendance the weekend of Oct. 11 for the first training session on the issue at Butler County Community College.

Chief Neal Nanna of the Harmony Volunteer Fire Department was a leading organizer of the event.

"There's really no other training in the local area to deal with this sort of thing," Nanna said. "We need to get our people up to speed."

The training session was sponsored by Mark-West Energy, which operates three natural gas processing facilities in Jackson Township.

The plant processes 145 million cubic feet of natural gas per day, and the company is planning to add two more processing plants to the facility that would triple that number.

Tom Baughman, coordinator of industrial safety training at BC3, said while the processing plants are in the Harmony coverage area,



A session at Butler County Community College trains firefighters how to extinguish a blaze at a natural gas well. Twenty firefighters from seven departments took part.

all departments in the county have some form of natural gas presence in their coverage areas.

"There are gas lines all over Butler County," he said. "These guys need to know how to respond. It's important to

get the information out to all fire departments in the county."

Wayne Kovac, fire training coordinator for BC3, said the natural gas industry has a good safety record, adding that companies like Mark-

West go through great lengths to ensure safety.

"They are very proactive in fire protection," he said.

Kovac said the likelihood of an incident occurring at a natural gas site is very low.

"But fire departments still need to be prepared," he said.

Kovac said a well-trained fire department has the potential to prevent a problem at a natural gas site from becoming catastrophic.

Nanna agreed that preparation is key.

"We'd rather be proactive than reactive," he said.

Firefighters studied and discussed natural gas well fires in a classroom setting for about four hours Oct. 11 before practicing on controlled fires the second half of the day and all day Oct. 12.

Those in attendance reviewed what should be considered in an incident action plan, which tells firefighters what to do should something occur.

The firefighters discussed concepts on how to fight natural gas fires, which differ from other fires due to the chemical nature of the gas.

Baughman said there is also a need for a pre-incident plan for firefighters, which includes touring natural gas sites in a department's respective coverage area.

"You have to learn what's there and how it works," he said.

Nanna said the action and pre-incident plans are both ongoing works in progress. He said he hopes to organize more training sessions on natural gas fire in the future. ♦