

In the United States, a network consisting of 1.8 million miles of pipelines delivers natural gas directly to consumers. Homes and businesses rely on this clean-burning and convenient fuel source every day for heating, cooking, and even power generation.

But natural gas is also highly combustible and potentially dangerous. With the nation's natural gas infrastructure getting older, catastrophic failures increasingly pose a real threat of serious injuries and wrongful death.

In Pennsylvania, there are also numerous risks associated with the Marcellus Shale production "play" now underway. As energy prices rise, the natural gas exploration and drilling industry seeks to extract more and more oil and gas from the Marcellus Shale distribution area in Pennsylvania and neighboring states. With more gas rigs in operation, however, come increased dangers and injuries.

The Allentown Explosion

In early February, a natural gas explosion ripped through Allentown, Pennsylvania, killing five and destroying a number of homes. Although investigators are still exploring the source of the disaster, many are speculating that an 80-year-old gas main made out of cast iron may be to blame. Predicting the failure of old gas lines can be hit-and-miss: a routine test for gas leaks in the area conducted just hours before the explosion came up clean.

In the wake of the Allentown tragedy, a renewed fervor has arisen among pipeline-safety groups pushing for the replacement of old cast iron pipelines. More modern materials are not the only improvement on the table: remotely operated or automatic shut-off valves capable of squelching the stream of natural gas during emergencies have been touted by government safety officials for years, although the industry has been slow to embrace these devices for all pipelines.

Allentown is only the latest in a recent string of natural gas explosions. The growing concern about the safety of aging pipelines that run under the streets of almost every city and town in the country could lead to vast changes in the underground natural gas infrastructure.

Legal Options

Those affected by natural gas explosions may have several avenues available to secure compensation for their losses. Family members of victims who were killed can pursue a wrongful death action against gas companies that were using outdated or damaged gas lines.

Those injured by oil drilling or natural gas accidents can seek to recover for medical expenses and lost wages,

as well as for pain and suffering. Awards for damage to property (homes, belongings, etc.) are also possible. In extreme cases, such as those involving reckless conduct by gas company employees, punitive damages may even be assessed.

If you or a family member has been injured or suffered some loss as a result of an incident involving oil rigs, natural gas or another industrial accident, contact an experienced attorney to explore your legal options.