

CHILE HIT BY DEADLY COLD WAVE

Contributed by Cynthia McMurry
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Santiago natural gas supplier Metrogas put its emergency plan into action on Monday, following last weekend's record high natural gas consumption in the Metropolitan Region. The cold front currently affecting Chile has caused the unusually high energy demand; the months of May and June have been the coldest the country has seen for the past 20 years.

In response, Metrogas activated its secondary plant in the Maipú borough for the first time; the plant adds an air-propane mixture to gas supply ducts in order to counteract the unusually low pressure levels caused by increased consumption.

The company assured clients that all extra costs brought on by the operation of the backup plant will be absorbed by the company. Propane is nearly four times as expensive as natural gas.

Though the high costs associated with propane make it an undesirable alternative to natural gas, Metrogas has few other options facing record high natural gas consumption. Gas consumption in Santiago reached its all-time high of 2.1 million cubic meters last Friday; average daily use for this time of year is normally 1.5 million cubic meters. For nearly a week prior to the crisis, domestic consumption had exceeded the amount of gas supplied to Chile by neighboring Argentina, which has been suffering from the same gas shortage and cold wave.

Despite the critical situation affecting both countries, Chilean government officials reassured that gas supplies to homes and businesses would not be affected. In an unprecedented effort to guarantee domestic and commercial gas supply, a ban on natural gas sales for vehicular use was initiated on Saturday. An estimated 5,000 Santiago taxis—nearly 10% of the total—are fueled by natural gas (but are also able to run on gasoline).

Though Metrogas has traditionally claimed Chile could operate on its gas reserve supply for up to four days without receiving Argentinean natural gas, under current circumstances, as little as one day without Argentine gas would force immediate gas rationing by the company.

Metrogas general manager Mauricio Russo recognized the precariousness of the current energy situation and Chile's vulnerability to cuts in the gas supplied by Argentina. "If the Argentine gas supply were to be completely cut off on Monday, our backup plants would have to operate to their full potential, and not as complementary plants. And, in that extreme case, consumption would have to be restricted," he said. A restriction would only permit gas to be used for showering and cooking, and not for residential heating purposes.

According to Energy Minister Mauricio Tokman, the Maipú backup plant will continue to operate until weather conditions in both countries improve, which is expected to occur within the next week. At that point, Chile would return to using only natural gas supplied by Argentina.

The gas emergency was not the only consequence brought on by the cold front: four people died from the cold weather over the weekend. Early Saturday morning, Eduardo Sepúlveda Jara (48) and Luis Arau Cortés (52) died of severe hypothermia in the comunas of La Reina and Estación Central, respectively. Arau had gotten lost in the capital while waiting for a bus; he had initially set out from Antofagasta and was going to visit family in Los Angeles. Sepúlveda was sleeping on a street in La Reina, apparently drunk.

Both Carlos Roa (68) and Óscar Martínez Pino (54) died on Santiago streets early Sunday morning, when the capital experienced the coldest temperature it has seen this year: 29 degrees F.

In an effort to provide shelter for the city's homeless during the cold spell, authorities opened the Victor Jara Stadium for the past four consecutive weekends. Though the stadium was opened on both Friday and Saturday nights, it remained closed on Sunday night, in part because of higher predicted temperatures.

Regional Chile was also affected by the cold, experiencing record low temperatures and heavy snowfall. Snow even fell in the port cities of Valparaíso and Puerto Montt, and an estimated 10,000 people were left stranded between Regions XVIII and X after Friday's snows.

Eastern portions of the XVIII and IX Regions, including the Lonquimay and Alto Biobio areas, were declared "agricultural emergency areas", and more than 6,000 people in native Pehuenche communities were left stranded. Emergency aid in the form of blankets, mattresses, food and medicine were distributed throughout the affected areas.

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