

# WHY DO GAS LEAKS MATTER?

SUBMITTED BY MOTHERS OUT FRONT

Gas utility companies are leaving gas leaks open and spewing harmful methane into the atmosphere for decades... and we, the customers are paying for it with our money, our health and our safety! Gas leaks can be the source of asthma, explosions, and is 25 times worse for climate change as carbon dioxide

**Old Infrastructure:** Massachusetts has one of the oldest infrastructure of underground pipes for natural gas in the country. As these pipes age, the materials break down and leaks begin, especially at the seams. MA currently has over 20,000 known leaks, contributing to more than 8 billion cubic feet of annual unaccounted for gas. The gas that leaks is 95% methane which seeps into our air and our soil. In addition to the immediate health risk (increased asthma) and safety risk (explosion), methane harms trees and is also a potent greenhouse gas. When unburned, it is much more damaging for climate change than carbon dioxide. Methane accounts for up to 10% of greenhouse gas emissions in our state and cancels out any gains we are able to make in energy efficiency and conservation.

**Hazards:** A leak's hazard level is graded according to regulations set up by the state. Grade 1 is hazardous and is required to be repaired immediately. Grade 2 is listed as "non-hazardous" but could potentially become a hazard and must be fixed within one year. Grade 3 leaks are labeled non-hazardous and are not expected to become a hazard, but are supposed to be re-evaluated at least once a year for as long as that leak lasts. All the known leaks in Bedford are Grade 2 or 3, but they can get worse over time and may change status. This grading system, however, does not account for the size of the leak. So a Grade 3 leak, such as the one that has been leaking for 25 years on Fletcher Rd in Bedford, might be leaking a large volume of methane, but just happens to be far enough away from any enclosed spaces. A Boston University study was published this year that analyzed the gas leaks in Boston and found that just 7% of the leaks accounted for 50% of the total leaked gas. These are called **super-emitters**, but the utility companies do not currently track volume of individual leaks.

**Cost:** The gas utilities are currently not required to fix all leaks, and in fact, are allowed to pass along the cost of "unaccounted for gas" to customers on each monthly bill! [A 2013 study](#) commissioned by Sen. Edward Markey found leaks cost Massachusetts natural gas customers \$640 million to \$1.5 billion between 2000 and 2011 for gas that never reached their homes. Nationally, customers paid at least \$20 billion from 2000 to 2011 for lost gas. Although a [bill was introduced this year](#) in the state legislature that would bar utilities from passing on the cost of lost gas to ratepayers, unfortunately for our household finances, this piece of legislation did not make it into the Omnibus Energy Bill that was approved by the House and Senate at the end of July.

**Climate Change:** Annually, the leaked methane reported by gas distribution companies equals the greenhouse gas equivalent of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 6 million automobiles, according to the same study above. The gas companies estimate that all the leaking infrastructure can be replaced over the next 25 years. But Climate Change will not wait 25 years! A version of [another bill](#) requiring companies to fix “environmentally significant” Grade 3 leaks did make it into the final Omnibus Energy Bill. Fixing the largest 10% of the leaks first would have a significant impact on reducing losses, thereby reducing our bills and reducing our collective greenhouse gas emissions sooner.

**Pressure & Publicity:** Audrey Schulman from the non-profit organization HEET (Home Energy Efficiency Team) helps to publicize gas leak information so that utility companies might fix leaks more quickly. So what can you do?

- You can find more information about fixing the leaks and see maps of leaks in Bedford and other MA communities at the HEET website: <http://www.heetma.org>
- You could adopt one of those leaks and report it to the gas company repeatedly until it is fixed (National Grid: 1-800-732-3400 / Eversource: 1-800-592-2000).
- **Town:** You could call our town Selectmen and ask for a town-wide ordinance that does what the state bill does not, specifically require utilities to (1) fix large leaks immediately, (2) check repairs and make sure they’re working, and (3) improve leak reporting and monitoring.
- **State:** You could call Governor Baker’s office and let him know that you want strict enforcement for the gas utilities to fix the super-emitter leaks first (Gov. Baker 617-725-4005).
- **Federal:** Since this is also a problem nationally, you could call our elected officials in the federal government to let them know you would like laws in place to have utilities fix leaks everywhere, beginning with super-emitters. (Congressman Seth Moulton 978-531-1669, Senator Elizabeth Warren 617-565-3170, Senator Ed Markey 617-565-8519)

Fixing gas leaks is good for everyone. We will save money. We will be safer, healthier, and have healthier trees. The saved natural resource could be used instead of wasted. By doing our part to help get all the leaks fixed, we will be able to look our grandchildren in the eye and tell them that we did try to take action to avert the catastrophic effects of Climate Change.

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