

Consumers Energy: Equipment maintenance didn't cause Jan. 30 fire

[Beth LeBlanc](#), The Detroit News Published 4:06 p.m. ET April 5, 2019 | Updated 4:09 p.m. ET April 5, 2019

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Flames shoot from two silo-looking structures at the compressor station. According to Walbridge.com, the Ray Compressor Station, with its 41.2 billion cubic feet of storage, is Consumers Energy's largest underground natural gas storage and compressor facility. (Photo: Todd McInturf, The Detroit News)

Consumers Energy's two-month review of a Jan. 30 compressor station fire on the coldest days of the year found that the fire was not a result of improper equipment maintenance.

The company said it will review a safety venting system that its officials believe led to a fireball erupting above its Macomb County compressor stations, knocking out the company's major storage supply site.

The fire at the Ray Compressor Station led the state to beg residents to turn down their thermostats as temperatures dipped into negative digits in late January.

The complicated series of events that led to the fire "was a perfect storm of things that never happened before that all happened at the same time," said Consumers Energy spokeswoman Katie Carey.

A ground fault that interrupted the signal to the plant's fire gate control system caused a station to release gas, Carey said. But because of the extreme cold, the gas did not disperse as expected and instead hovered above the station until high winds carried it over a second station.

Over the second station, "extremely hot equipment" ignited the natural gas, creating a fire ball and subsequent issues at other facilities on site.

The fires crippled the Macomb County facility, which has the capacity to distribute 64% of the company's natural gas, and led to some shutoffs at large industrial users.



CEO Patti Poppe, who took to Facebook Live late Wednesday for a personal appeal to consumers to lower their thermostats (Photo: Facebook page of Consumers Energy)

Later that night, Poppe and Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer urged residents to turn down their thermostats to conserve energy and avoid mass shutoffs to residential customers.

The cause of the ground fault that led to the fire is still unknown, Carey said.

While the utility found no evidence of a failure to maintain its equipment, Consumers will conduct gas dispersion modeling this spring to determine what if any changes need to be made to the company's safety venting fire-gate process, Carey said.

“Under unique and extreme weather conditions, the process became hazardous,” the company said about the safety venting process.

The Michigan Public Service Commission in early February opened two probes into the Jan. 30 incident. One will investigate the circumstances surrounding the fire at Consumers Energy’s Ray Compressor and another, at the request of Whitmer, will review the state’s supply and delivery of natural gas and propane.

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