

Firefighters learn to handle propane

MANATEE COUNTY — Hazardous Material Coordinator Bob Tollise has a propane tank at his home.

It's great, he said. Everyone in the house can take a shower at the same time without running out of hot water, and the power bills are noticeably lower. But, like 75% of what Hazmat handles, propane is a flammable substance. It has a dark side.

"It's heavier than air. It'll stay low and won't dissipate," Tollise said. "It's going to seek an ignition source."

That can be a problem for firefighters, said East Manatee Fire District Training Officer Tim Hyden, particularly in mobile home parks where the gas can settle under a structure. Sometimes the best option for firefighters is to simply burn the residual gas from a leaking or threatened tank.

Last week, employees of Suburban Propane visited East Manatee Station 2 and demonstrated propane-burning equipment to the firefighters. The equipment comes as a kit and fits into a bag that can be easily handled. It includes a flare and hose structure that can be set up in a matter of minutes. The system, Hyden said, will allow for propane to be handled in a quick, safe manner.

The demonstration was part of Tollise's push to homogenize hazardous material equipment across the county. Tollise began in his position about a year ago, single-handedly running county Hazmat operations. His goal, he said, has been to standardize training across all of the county's fire districts, sharing knowledge and equipment.

A propane kit, like the one demonstrated to the firefighters, will be placed in each of the four Hazmat trailers around the county. That way, firefighters will find familiar equipment when they need to deal with leaking propane.

The system hooks easily onto propane tanks without a need for wrenches or excessive tightening. Gas propane can be

burned off, but that takes time on a large tank, sometimes as long as 10 hours. But the kit can also burn the liquid propane, which exists in the tank under pressure. Burning the liquid, which happens at a rate of five gallons per minute, instead of vapor cuts the burn-off time roughly in half, and it's safer, Suburban officials said.

The burn-off creates an impressive flame. The radiat heat is low, but may be of concern, Hyden said, in tightly packed

mobile home parks. In that case, firefighters would be ready to protect surrounding structures, he said.

Hazmat will next hold a training course for officers county-wide. That will take place on Feb. 20, and Hazmat officers will learn safety and command. That will continue, Tollise said, his goal of unifying the county's departments.

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Above: East Manatee firefighters viewed a demonstration of burning propane (see top picture).

Photos by Rob Brannon