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Bay Area air board wants to cut refinery emissions 20 percent

By Denis Cuff [Contra Costa Times](#)

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Pushing the envelope on reducing air pollution, Bay Area air quality officials said Wednesday they want to cut oil refinery emissions by 20 percent.

Environmentalists called the plan a groundbreaking new approach, while industry leaders said it was radical and placed illegal restrictions on oil plants.

Though it set no deadline for reductions, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District board said it is steering a course to push oil refineries harder to upgrade equipment to cut emissions. Officials want a road map by December for considering new rules or procedures in 2015 to help meet the target. Refineries that show they already have the best and most modern equipment, and therefore could not meet the 20 percent requirement, could receive waivers.

"Refineries have made a lot of progress in reducing emissions as a result of aggressive rule making, but there is more work to be done," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond, also a regional air board member. "We know there is technology out there to do better."

Public pressure for reductions increased after a fire at the Chevron oil refinery in August 2012 sent thousands of people to hospitals with throat and eye irritation and headaches.

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By a 15-0 vote (with seven members absent), the air board gave its staff marching orders to come up with an emission reduction plan, and approved two related actions. By next spring or earlier, the board said it will consider a new rule to more rigorously determine current baseline emissions for refineries, and then track changes over time. Also by spring, the board said it will consider a rule barring refineries from increasing emissions as a result of equipment changes or modernizations. Several refineries are planning renovations to give them more flexibility to process crude oil with higher sulfur contents.

Jack Broadbent, the air district's executive officer, said the joint actions enable the district to look broadly at entire refinery complexes for ways to cut pollution by 20 percent. "The idea is that by the end of 2015, we will have a rule or set of rules to complement the strategy," Broadbent said.

The Sierra Club, Communities for a Better Environment and several other Environmental groups praised the plan as a groundbreaking step toward protecting neighbors from local pollution, and the earth from global warming gases.

"This is a way to improve the lives of communities around refineries," said Marilyn Bardet of Benicians for a Healthy and Safe Community.

Oil industry managers, workers, and lawyers said it's arbitrary, radical and illegal for the district to set a 20 percent reduction goal for one industry.

Guy Bjerke, Bay Area manager of the Western States Petroleum Association, said the district is wrong to consider any reduction target before it has completed its new inventory of emissions at the five refineries. They are Chevron, Shell, Valero, Phillips 66 and Tesoro.

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"The reductions must be based on sound science, not on speculation," Bjerke said.

Industry lawyers also said the district has no evidence that a 20 percent cut would improve public health.

Gioia said it's premature for the oil industry to condemn the emission reduction effort before new rules are proposed with details on cuts. "There are many details we have to work out," he said.

Nate Miley, an Alameda County supervisor who chairs the pollution board, said the district is prepared to defend its reduction plan in court if the oil industry sues.

"I would kindly ask the industry to stand down and work through the process with us," Miley said. "We have a mission to protect the air and public health."

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