

Air quality: Bay Area refineries to face more scrutiny

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Bay Area oil refineries will be required to increase monitoring of air pollution leaving their plants and, for the first time, disclose properties of crude oil coming in, under a regional air board rule adopted Wednesday.

The emissions tracking rule is aimed at determining if stricter measures are needed to curb air pollution from the five refineries in the region, air quality officials said.

The gasoline making plants are the largest source of industrial air pollution in the nine Bay Area counties.

"This rule is about providing more information to the public so they can see what emissions are coming from these industries," said Jack Broadbent, executive officer of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

For the first time in California, refineries from a region will be required to give detailed information about properties of crude oil stock, including concentrations of toxic benzene and sulfur dioxide.

The information, regulators say, will help determine if dirtier crude feedstock from the Canadian tar sands region and other places leads to dirtier air.

The rule also requires refineries to install more monitors on their plant fence lines to track accidental or routine releases that could waft into neighborhoods.

"There already is some fence line monitoring, but we want to put all the refineries on a level playing field and use a similar approach," said Eric Stevenson, the air district's director of technical services. "We're designing them to protect the communities downwind of the plants."

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In response to criticism from environmentalists, the air district decided not to require refineries to install and maintain additional pollution monitors outside their plants in downwind communities. Instead, district employees will set up and maintain the equipment, Broadbent said.

The emissions tracking rule was adopted 18-3 by the air district board Wednesday afternoon after more than 20 people spoke on the proposal developed over three years. Bay Area oil

refineries include Chevron in Richmond, Shell in Martinez, Tesoro north of Concord, Phillips 66 in Rodeo, and Valero in Benicia.

The rule is the latest in a series of pollution reduction measures proposed after a large fire at the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond in 2012 sent thousands of people to hospitals with smoke-related symptoms.

For years, refinery neighbors have demanded more monitors to track air pollution from the plants.

Environmentalists say the rule fails to go far enough because it doesn't set hard limits on total emissions from refineries.

"There is some good in this rule, but it's a sideshow that distracts from the district's need to set an overall cap on refinery pollution," said Greg Karras, scientist with Communities for a Better Environment, a statewide environmental group.

Several refining company employees and industry representatives said the crude rule could lead to the release of trade secrets about their business operations.

Sharing that concern, some air board members asked to postpone the decision, but they were outvoted.

Air board staff said they routinely handle industry trade secrets without disclosing them publicly. If a member of the public asks the air district for industrial information from a company, the firm can ask the courts to decide if the information can be withheld, officials said.

In another decision Wednesday, the air board approved a rule requiring large sulfur dioxide pollution reductions from a Phillips 66 plant near Rodeo that recycles coke, a hard, black refining byproduct. Those reductions will amount to a 1 percent or more cut in the total emissions from the Bay Area's refining industry, the air district estimated.

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