

Chevron eyed as source of foul odor last week; fines likely

Air district considering increasing refinery fines



The Chevron refinery in Richmond, Calif. Air officials are investigating whether two flaring incidents over the past several days are connected to the noxious odors smelled as far away as San Francisco. (Contra Costa Times/Mark DuFrene)

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RICHMOND — Air district officials are zeroing in on the Chevron refinery in Richmond as the source of foul odors detected in San Francisco and Richmond, with fines against the company likely, according to one member of the district's board of directors.

The refinery experienced two flaring incidents, one on Dec. 27, shortly before midnight, and the other Dec. 28 around 8:45 p.m., according to a report issued by the refinery for Contra Costa County health officials. One of the flaring incidents was not reported for at least 12 hours, violating state law, according to John Gioia, a Contra Costa County supervisor and member of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District board.

Gioia said in a phone interview Friday that air district officials now believe that the flaring incidents were responsible for the odors that were reported in San Francisco and Richmond.

Around the same time of the incidents, residents of Point Richmond and the Marina neighborhood in San Francisco reported sulfur-like smells, nausea and sore throats. That prompted a joint investigation by Contra Costa Health Services and the air district, including weather modeling on the particular days of the flaring to determine the source of the odors. The investigation found abnormally high concentrations of hydrogen sulfide, a chemical found in petroleum and natural gas.

“Without the weather modeling, it would have been very difficult to track it down,” Gioia said.

Now, fines against Chevron are likely, with an official announcement expected sometime next week.

Refineries are required to self-report any flaring incidents, no matter how minor. Not reporting them, or delaying advising the county of what happened, is problematic, said Randy Sawyer, chief hazardous materials officer at Contra Costa Health Services.

“We are concerned about not being notified, but we will take action to make sure refineries know what they are supposed to be doing,” Sawyer said. “These facilities should know by now that they are required to notify.”

Flaring tends to be more common this time of the year because plants are more likely to be shut down and then started up again due to less demand for their products, he said.

Over the past two weeks, all four Contra Costa refineries have experienced flaring, according to Sawyer.

Meanwhile, the air district board last month introduced legislation to increase maximum penalties for toxic releases by refineries from \$10,000 for incidents that did not result in injuries to \$100,000. Two previous attempts to increase fines faced stiff opposition from industry and were quickly killed.

Despite the recent incidents, refineries have improved their track record on flaring over the past decade, thanks to new rules by the air district, Gioia said.

“The goal is to not have flaring, understanding that they may need to do so in an emergency situation,” he said.