

Air tests show benzene detected after smoky Richmond scrapyards fire

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RICHMOND — Air quality tests from a metal scrapyards fire this week were released on Friday and showed elevated levels of benzene, a chemical known to cause cancer and to damage the central nervous system.

The Contra Costa Health Services Department released the test results from air samples that showed the higher levels of benzene taken around Point Richmond after the large fire Tuesday night at Sims Metal Management.

Health officials become concerned when benzene levels top 8 to 12 parts per billion in air samples. At the scene of the fire, levels reached as high as 318 parts per billion as the fire raged, but levels around the community did not top 22 to 23 parts per billion.

Randy Sawyer, Chief Environmental Health and Hazards for CCHS, noted that, for comparison, pumping gasoline exposes an individual to benzene levels in parts per million, which is over three times the amount found at the scene of the fire.

“The question is really prolonged exposure to that level that would increase people’s risk for long-term effects,” Sawyer said.

Contra Costa Health officials said that samples taken in North Richmond, Atchison Village and fence-line monitors at the Chevron Refinery did not show elevated readings of benzene or any other chemicals that were analyzed.

The two-alarm fire broke out at 5:08 p.m. on Tuesday at the Sims Metal scrapyards at 600 S. Fourth Street. Fire crews on scene arrived to [find a 20-foot pile](#) of metal on fire and fought the blaze for 10 hours, finally getting extinguished at 4 a.m.. The fire prompted a call to shelter-in-place for anyone in the area due to the heavy smoke that permeated the area.

There were no reported injuries from the fire or the smoke, officials said. The cause of the fire is still unknown.

Dr. David Goldstein, deputy health officer for CCHS, said that they do not know what the long-term health impacts from the fire will be and encouraged anyone to contact their healthcare provider if they are concerned about the health effects.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District continues to investigate the incident and whether Sims Metal Management will face fines.

“I’ve been told that the particulate matter level were at levels similar to the Napa and Sonoma fires. Clearly it was difficult to breath and had an impact on people with respiratory issues,” said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia.

Sims Metal Management will hold a town hall meeting at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 7 at the Nevin Community Center at 598 Nevin Avenue.