

# EAST BAY TIMES

## Air quality board requires Richmond, Martinez refineries to drastically cut air pollution

Chevron, PBF required to invest in new technology



RICHMOND, CA – FEBRUARY 10: A drone view of Point Richmond and the Chevron Refinery is seen in Richmond, Calif., on Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

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In a dramatic move that forces the oil industry to reckon with the harmful pollutants its gas-producing operations emit into Bay Area skies, air quality regulators this week ordered [refineries to install special equipment](#) to make breathing safer for nearby residents.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District's board voted 19-3 on Wednesday to require Chevron Richmond Refinery and the PBF Energy refinery in Martinez to acquire

“wet gas scrubbers” to clean up hazardous particulate matter that is suspended in the air when crude oil is refined into fuels.

Refinery officials say they’ve already taken steps to improve air quality and the multimillion-dollar costs associated with scrubbers would devastate their operations.

The board’s action delivered a significant victory for environmental groups and public health advocates who say it’ll save lives. According to the district’s data, 11 people in surrounding neighborhoods die prematurely each year from particulate matter emitted by the Chevron refinery and six from PBF Energy’s plant.

“These are predominantly Black and Latinx residents who live in these communities,” board director and Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said of the refineries’ neighbors. “We have a responsibility to those who live in the shadows of industry to improve their air quality and health.”

UCSF researchers have found that Black and Latinx communities in the Bay Area have higher levels of asthma than the general population. And in Richmond, where the Chevron refinery operates, [the asthma rate is double the state average](#).

Tarnel Abbott, an activist and former librarian at the Richmond Public Library, said during the meeting it’s “frightening” to live in a heavily polluted city such as Richmond, but “we love where we live, and we don’t think we should have to sacrifice our health so the refinery can run a cheaper operation.”

Michael Scott, a Richmond resident who previously worked at the Chevron refinery, said in an interview Thursday it’s especially important to breathe more easily in light of the coronavirus pandemic. “We need to try and decrease death and get everybody healthy around here,” he said.

Under the district’s new regulation, refineries will need to install gas scrubbers, which remove pollutants from the gas streams. Without them, those pollutants are emitted into the air by “fluid catalytic cracking units” — machines that are crucial in the process of converting crude oil to gas and diesel fuels.

chevron Corp. spokesman Sean Comey, in a prepared statement, said the company recently finished a refinery modernization project that reduced particulate matter by 25% — more than what the air board’s new rule would achieve.

Comey said Chevron’s refinery modernization project recently reduced particulate matter by 25%, more than what the district board’s rule would achieve.

“Unfortunately, rather than rely on actual data from our facility, Air Board members adopted a rule based on erroneous data that fails to significantly improve local air quality at an extreme cost that could impact Bay Area consumers who rely on affordable energy in their daily lives,” Comey added.

He said a wet gas scrubber would cost \$1.48 billion, considerably more than the \$241 million to \$579 million the district estimated.

“The rule threatens the supply of affordable, reliable and ever-cleaner energy at a time when our regional economy is still struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic,” Comey said, adding that Chevron will be reviewing its legal options.

PBF Energy could not be reached for comment. But the company’s Western region president said in a recent letter to the district that the cost of installing the scrubbers would force the Martinez refinery to shut down. He estimated the cost at \$800 million.

The district’s decision will affect only the refineries in Richmond and Martinez because nearby Benicia’s Valero refinery has already installed wet gas scrubbers. The [Marathon refinery in Martinez meanwhile is idle](#), with no plans to restart refining operations, according to the district’s staff report.

Many union workers from both refineries urged the board not to mandate the scrubbers, saying they fear being laid off to offset the costs of installing the new technology.

“We build the highways and bridges, and we maintain the refineries,” said Chris Snyder of Operating Engineers Local 3. “In the meantime, we don’t need these refineries to shut down. These are some of the best-paying jobs in the Bay Area.”

But some board directors pledged to help “transition” any laid-off workers into new jobs and careers, and they criticized Chevron and PBF for potentially making their workers bear the costs of improving local air quality.

“There is no way that we should have the employees of the companies we regulate be leveraged by the employers,” said Cindy Chavez, a Santa Clara County supervisor and the air quality board’s chair.

A few board members worried that the new rules could bring new lawsuits.

Director Mark Ross, a Martinez councilman, argued the board would be better off seeking a middle ground with the refineries instead of diving into years of court challenges.

“To say, ‘We’re hoping we pass this, we hope it sticks, we hope the courts adjudicate it somehow,’ that to me doesn’t feel like the right way,” said Ross, who voted against the requirement.

But other directors, including Contra Costa Supervisor Gioia, said threats from oil companies are nothing new. Every decision by the air quality board over the years has resulted in lawsuits, and it has prevailed every time, he said.

Environmentalists, doctors and residents of Richmond and Martinez maintained that air pollution is slowly killing them and urged the board to approve the most stringent control possible.

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