

Chevron Refinery Malfunction During Storm Shut Down Processing Units, Causing Fire and Toxic Flaring

By [Ted Goldberg](#) Oct 28



The Chevron refinery in Richmond. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

A loss of steam production at Chevron's Richmond refinery during a major rainstorm on Sunday morning triggered the shutdown of several processing units, leading to a fire at the facility and several days of flaring, the oil giant told regulators this week.

Refinery officials say close to 17 tons of sulfur dioxide were released over two days as the facility sent gases to its flares, a safety technique often used by refineries to ease pressure and stabilize operations.

The accident prompted dozens of complaints from nearby residents, and is now being investigated by the regional air district and county public health officials to determine whether the odor led to the closure of several local schools. The incident, along with another malfunction at the PBF Refinery in nearby Martinez, may also temporarily increase the average cost of gasoline in California, according to Patrick De Haan, the head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy.

Over the past several years, Chevron's Richmond facility has conducted the most flaring operations of any Bay Area refinery. The one that started Sunday and continued intermittently into the week lasted longer than usual.

"I am angry and I'm upset and I am sick and tired of the community having to be put through this large number of continual flaring incidents," Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said in an interview Thursday.

The [company's report to the Contra Costa County Hazardous Materials Program](#) comes after the department revealed in a [separate report](#) that its previous inspections had failed to detect corrosion developing on an underwater pipeline, leading to a large fuel spill in the bay in February.

That disclosure came out a day before Chevron CEO Michael Wirth testified before a U.S. House committee on climate change disinformation.

In its report on this week's flaring, Chevron emphasized that its testing did not suggest any violation of air quality standards in communities near the refinery. The stationary and mobile air monitors used by county health officials and local air regulators did not detect problems either, according to Gioia, who also sits on the board of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

"That doesn't address the long-term cumulative exposure that communities have with regard to these types of chemical releases," Gioia said, adding that multiple plumes of gas and smoke erupted from the refinery on Sunday.

The air district, which is in a [legal battle with Chevron over new pollution rules](#), has issued a notice of violation against the company for public nuisance complaints it received about the flaring, said agency spokesperson Ralph Borrmann. The district received 33 air quality complaints about the incident between Sunday and Tuesday, he said.

County health officials are also looking into whether a gaseous odor that prompted the closure of Richmond High School, Ford Elementary and the Peres K-8 School on Monday was tied to the flaring operation. An odor drifted into Richmond High again on Thursday, prompting the school to briefly evacuate students and staff.

Chevron issued an all clear about its flaring event on Wednesday morning, local officials said, but the refinery reported yet another flaring incident that night. The air district is investigating whether Wednesday night's releases are tied to the problem that started Sunday.

The refinery also revealed that a fire was ignited in one of its units that lost steam pressure, and that the blaze was quickly put out. Chevron says it's investigating why it lost steam production.

"While we always hope to avoid it, intermittent flaring is a possibility during any start-up process," the company said in a statement. "Since Sunday, Chevron and various regulatory agencies have taken numerous air quality measurements which were all under key detection limits and well below health standard limits in our adjacent neighborhoods."

Gioia says the latest flaring incident has prompted him to explore with air district officials stronger flaring regulations for Bay Area refineries.

"It is clear that the existing flare rule, which had been effective for many years, is not effective," Gioia said, adding that he would push again for state legislation to increase fine amounts for refineries that violate air quality rules, even as [that effort that has failed in the past](#).

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