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Contacts:

Greg Karras, Senior Scientist (510) 302-0430 x19

Andrés Soto, Community Organizer (510) 282-5363

Community Wins Independent Role in Chevron Fire Investigation

Widespread health impacts expose “blinding” local air monitoring gap; Pattern of events suggests prevention opportunities

Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) accepted a local government invitation to join in the “root cause analysis” of the Richmond refinery crude unit fire that occurred on August 6, 2012. The analysis will be performed under the Industrial Safety Ordinance adopted by Contra Costa County and the City of Richmond. This would mark the first direct community group participation in a root cause investigation under the Ordinance.

“Safety demands a truly independent investigation of what caused this disaster so that the community can trust and act on, to prevent another one from hurting people again,” said Greg Karras, a Senior Scientist at CBE.

The unprecedented invitation followed the community group’s August 7th demand for a truly independent public investigation. Three days later, county staff proposed a role in the investigation for community groups already advising the City’s refinery project committee. After further discussion with City officials and allies, on August 14, 2012, CBE accepted that proposal today. As outlined, the groups would be provided all factual information provided for the County’s investigation, as well as an independent expert hired by the City and then reimbursed by Chevron, and opportunities to collaborate in the investigation of incident causes and how to prevent their recurrence during frequent. Meetings are expected to occur weekly, CBE reported.

“The thousands who experienced the impacts of that pollution measured with their bodies what the government’s grossly inadequate air monitoring missed: The community is the real expert on what Chevron’s crude unit fire did to us,” said Andrés Soto, a Richmond resident and Community Organizer for CBE.

The fire injured six workers, created a huge toxic cloud that sent more than 5,700 people to area hospitals, and exposed serious gaps in government air monitoring. The incident is part of a pattern of repeated pollution incidents at the refinery that suggests future, potentially catastrophic incidents might be preventable. Emerging questions about why the crude unit pipe that leaked last week was not replaced during scheduled maintenance last year, and whether Chevron tried to repair it before shutting the unit down, suggest clear paths for investigation, Karras said.