

Chevron sidesteps call for cleaner tech

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A fire in a crude oil unit at the Chevron refinery in Richmond on Aug. 6 produced a cloud of black smoke that sent 15,000 people to hospitals seeking treatment. Photo: John Storey, Special To The Chronicle / SF

Chevron will make only small-scale pollution control improvements as it rebuilds the fire-damaged crude oil unit at its Richmond refinery - telling regulators it will not increase production, a decision that allows the company to avoid requirements for new emissions technology.

After an Aug. 6 fire at the refinery produced a black cloud of smoke that sent 15,000 people to hospitals seeking treatment, the [Richmond City Council](#) and the Bay Area [Air Quality Management District](#) adopted

resolutions urging Chevron to use the best pollution control technology available in rebuilding the plant.

Chevron officials, however, told air-quality officials last week that they do not plan to increase production and are simply repairing existing equipment.

"Chevron believes the repairs can proceed without district permits or approvals," company officials said in documents they filed with the air-quality agency. They added, however, that they would do more to filter out air pollution and cut by one-third the number of potentially leaky pipe valves and fittings, steps they said they were not legally forced to take.

"All repairs and replacement equipment and materials will meet or exceed applicable industry standards and codes," refinery General Manager [Nigel Hearne](#) wrote.

No huge cuts

Wayne Kino, director of enforcement for the air-quality district, said the agency doesn't expect dramatic cuts in pollution levels under Chevron's plan. "There is not going to be a huge emission reduction as the result of this new equipment," he said.

Environmentalists say Chevron will continue to use a 35-year-old design of the crude oil unit rather than install better technology - losing a chance to make a significant dent in routine emissions of pollutants into surrounding neighborhoods.

"It's not only unsafe," [Greg Karras](#), senior scientist with the advocacy group Communities for a Better Environment, said of Chevron's refinery repair plan. "It's cheating the public" out of significant pollution reductions.

Minor reductions

Karras said Chevron's new filtering system would cut only 3 1/2 pounds from a total of 1,240 pounds of particulates the refinery sends into the air each day. The company's plan to reduce the number of valves and other fittings will cut smog-producing pollutants by 5 percent at most, he said.

Chevron is also refusing to update fossil-fuel-driven technology that boils raw oil to nearly 700 degrees in the crude unit, Karras said. Thirty-five years ago, "we did not have the technology we have now, and half that energy was wasted," he said.

New technology provides more efficient ways of heating the raw oil, which could result in greater pollution reductions, Karras said.

"This isn't over yet," he said. "Chevron and public officials should know already that this community is not going to sit back and let them continue to pollute us. We're going to figure out how to fix this problem."

Environmentalists may have little legal recourse, however. Under federal law, a refinery operator has to use the best available pollution control technology - defined as the most advanced equipment in service worldwide - only when it makes large-scale changes or increases production. In practice, refineries have opted to replace damaged equipment rather than push for greater capacity.

Richmond's request

Chevron notified air quality officials of its rebuilding plans Wednesday, a month after the Richmond City Council unanimously approved a resolution calling on the company to use "the highest standards and best technology" in repairing the crude oil unit. In addition to improved filtering equipment, Chevron said it would use more corrosion-resistant metal after finding that the Aug. 6 fire was caused by a 40-year-old pipe that had badly corroded.

Despite the council's vote, the city Planning Department authorized a permit for Chevron on Oct. 19 allowing it to rebuild as it saw fit, without specifying that the company use the best available technology.

Mayor [Gayle McLaughlin](#) said that city staff had no legal grounds for doing otherwise. But she added, "I expected our staff to hold back on permits until we had an understanding of what was being permitted and whether it was the best technology available at reducing emissions. "Chevron should be offering a whole lot better than the minimum - it seems that is what they are offering," McLaughlin said. "They should be using this opportunity to build much further along in terms of reducing emissions."

"We will take whatever we can get - a minor decrease is still something," McLaughlin added. But "it's nothing compared to what I expected."

Complied with law

City Manager [Bill Lindsay](#) said Richmond granted the permits because Chevron's plans complied with city codes. He said officials rely on the air-quality district to determine whether Chevron's repairs are using the right technology.

Air-quality officials said they were looking at whether Chevron is making the appropriate changes. However, Chevron's reconstruction effort is already under way, and the company has said it hopes to have the refinery operating at full capacity again by as early as January.

Company officials said in a statement that they were "moving forward methodically, diligently and transparently in the repair of the crude unit, and only performing work that has been permitted by the appropriate agencies."

Chevron said the fire damaged less than 20 percent of the crude oil unit, and that repairs will comply with the air-quality district's rules for best available technology.

Contra Costa Supervisor [John Gioia](#), chairman of the district's Board of Directors, said the panel will get an update on the status of Chevron's pollution control measures at a public hearing Nov. 19.

"This sounds like we will achieve a slight reduction of emissions," Gioia said. "I want to ensure that the air district is pushing Chevron as much as possible - beyond what is required - to improve the technology of the rebuild and to reduce emissions."

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<http://www.sfgate.com/default/article/Chevron-sidesteps-call-for-cleaner-tech-4028551.php#page-1>