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Contact:  
Mike Wilson  
Director  
Labor Occupational Health Program  
University of California, Berkeley  
[mpwilson@berkeley.edu](mailto:mpwilson@berkeley.edu)  
510-333-1460 (cell)  
510 642-5703 (office)

**LABOR, COMMUNITY, AND UNIVERSITY FORM NEW COLLABORATIVE  
TO IMPROVE HEALTH, SAFETY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICES IN  
THE OIL REFINING INDUSTRY**

**\$1 million fine by Cal/OSHA against Chevron a wake-up call for refinery workers  
and communities.**

The \$1 million in fines for willful and serious safety violations issued by [Cal/OSHA](#) today against the Chevron Corporation should be a wake-up call for the Bay Area and the nation, according to a new coalition of labor, community, university, and environmental health groups that has formed following the August 6, 2012 fire at the Chevron refinery in Richmond.

“This was a near-miss that was totally preventable. It was also inevitable, given the way these companies are running the refineries. And it’s probably going to happen again,” said Ron Espinoza, state-wide director for the United Steelworkers union (USW) and a leader of the coalition. The USW represents most workers in the California refinery industry. “We see it every day. The companies haven’t been doing preventive maintenance, and it’s getting more and more dangerous. Refinery accidents are off the charts in the U.S. compared to the rest of the world. We don’t think it has to be like this.”

The coalition, which formed under the aegis of the [Labor Occupational Health Program](#) at UC Berkeley, consists of the [USW](#), [Communities for a Better Environment](#), the [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#), the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), and the [BlueGreen Alliance](#). The group “found common ground,” according LOHP director Mike Wilson, “on the need to engage the industry directly, with every possible tool available, to improve safety and reduce health and environmental damage.” “We know that the refineries can meet much higher standards, because they’re already doing it in other countries,” said Wilson. “They’re even the same companies. We don’t have the right kinds of regulations here, so the refineries put less attention and investment into safety. The coalition believes California should change that.”

According to data gathered by the coalition, the California refinery industry experienced 41 new accidents, leaks, chemical releases, fires, break-downs, and other failures since the August 6, 2012 Richmond fire, or about two each week, releasing toxic substances

into the air and in some cases endangering the lives of workers and nearby residents. "The industry's record pretty much sums it up," said Mike Smith, USW Local 5 safety representative. "These so-called accidents are not accidents at all, they're what happens when an industry doesn't pay attention to safety, when managers let money trump safety."

This week, the Chevron corporation reported that it paid \$10 million in medical-compensation claims submitted by some of the nearly 15,000 people who sought medical attention following the August 6 blaze. The coalition believes these expenses, including the \$1 million in fines levied by Cal/OSHA, aren't nearly enough of a deterrent to the refinery industry, which they describe as highly profitable and the recipient of numerous subsidies paid for by taxpayers.

Greg Karras, senior scientist for Communities for a Better Environment, said the culture of the industry needs to change so that it places more value on the safety of its workers and neighboring communities. "We need a comprehensive safety culture in this industry, and that's going to start with action by Chevron to prevent another fire or chemical release before it kills or injures more people. Finding and fixing all the corrosion at the Richmond refinery--not just the small area where one corroded pipe ruptured in Chevron's fire last August--could prevent another and potentially more catastrophic incident. When people debate whether the penalties are big enough after the disaster, it's too late."

Representatives of the [U.S. Chemical Safety Board](#) report that accidents in the refinery industry have grown steadily in the U.S. at the same time they have declined overseas, including in developing countries. Following a massive industrial release of toxic dioxins in Seveso, Italy in 1976 the European Union instigated new rules that steadily switched the burden of ensuring safety from the government to the managers of hazardous industries, including refineries, who must demonstrate adherence to rigorous health, safety and environmental standards as a condition of operating their plants. The process is overseen by safety experts who serve as government auditors. This "Safety Case" approach has produced a marked decline in industrial accidents in the EU and other countries where it has been adopted.

The coalition is calling for a similar approach in California, with public access to the information provided by the companies and the actions taken by government auditors. They are also calling for a host of immediate changes, such as a thorough assessment of corrosion damage, better emissions reporting by the industry, and a reduction in the use of "flaring" and other processes that release air contaminants into the community. "We should think of the near-miss in Richmond as the beginning of real change in this industry," said Charlotte Brody of the BlueGreen Alliance. "This industry is too important in this state and in the country to be run this way. It needs to be managed more efficiently and with the best safety practices to protect workers and communities. California can and should set a better example for the nation."

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