

Few concrete answers to the Chevron fire

Demian Bulwa

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The agencies investigating the fire at the Chevron refinery in Richmond sought to assure residents Monday that they would hold the company accountable and use lessons from the Aug. 6 blaze to prevent future accidents.

"We want to take the lessons here to all of the 150 refineries," Dan Tillema, the lead investigator from the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, said at a public meeting in Richmond's City Council chambers.

The investigators, though, faced a skeptical and at times angry crowd of about 50 people - and they were able to provide few concrete answers. Some in the audience said they were still feeling ill from the plume of smoke put out by the fire in the refinery's crude-oil processing unit.

"This fatigue and fogginess I have is pretty apparent to me," said Valerie Yerger, an assistant professor at UCSF who has studied the health effects of tobacco and its marketing in African American communities.

Tillema said his team had interviewed 70 Chevron employees and obtained 20,000 pages of documents but had not taken possession of the 8-inch pipe that caught fire because it is still leaking flammable hydrocarbons.

Tillema said his team would take a "holistic approach," trying to discover not only why the pipe failed but also whether the disaster could have been the result of poor management or insufficient laws. The probe could take 12 to 18 months, he said.

He was joined by officials including Jack Broadbent, who heads the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. He announced that the district's board of directors would hold a special meeting on Sept. 10 to discuss the fire.

The district has come under criticism for its limited air monitoring around Chevron and other refineries, particularly during accidents like the one this month, which sent more than 15,000 people to emergency rooms complaining of respiratory problems and nose, throat and eye irritation.

"We understand there were impacts. Our own staff experienced those impacts," Broadbent said. "We're looking at how we can beef up the monitoring around Chevron. ... We want to get that discussion moving as soon as possible."

Daniel Meer, an assistant director from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said his agency would determine whether Chevron violated the federal Clean Air Act, then proceed with administrative sanctions or a lawsuit.

Greg Karras, a senior scientist with Communities for a Better Environment, urged the investigators to look into whether the accident might be related to sulfur-related corrosion in the pipe. Karras said the sulfur content in the crude oil processed by Chevron had grown over the past 15 years.

"You can't duck the issue," Karras said, "because you don't want to rebuild the crude unit wrong."

Tillema said investigators would look at every possible cause and had collected samples of materials that passed through the pipe. He said he had no information on changes in the sulfur content at the Chevron refinery.

"If the crude oil plays a role," he said, "we're interested in it."

Asked about the quality of the crude oil, Chevron spokesman Justin Higgs said, "It's too early to know what caused the incident. We are working diligently with all appropriate authorities to better understand what happened so that we can take steps to prevent it from ever occurring again."

Broadbent said the district would work with Chevron and city and county officials on a plan to remove the damaged crude unit - which has not been scheduled. Demolition may release asbestos, he said, while restarting the unit may produce emissions.

Demian Bulwa is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: dbulwa@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@demianbulwa](https://twitter.com/demianbulwa)