

CRUDE JOURNALISM

CHEVRON BOUGHT A CALIFORNIA NEWSPAPER TO MASK ITS RECORD ON SAFETY ABUSES

By Thor Benson Mar 26 2014



A fire at the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, California, forced 15,000 people to seek medical attention. Photo courtesy of Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

Richmond is tucked into California's western tricep, a former wine town with a population just over 100,000. Under the administration of Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, the town is the **largest city in the United States with a Green Party mayor**. It's also an oil town—in 1901, Standard Oil set up a tank farm, choosing the location for its easy access to San Francisco Bay. Soon after, a western terminus of the Santa Fe Railroad was built in Richmond to handle the

outflux of crude. Over the course of the 20th century, Standard Oil became the Standard Oil Company of California (SOCAL), and later, Chevron.

Throughout the 90s, the **Richmond refinery was fined thousands of dollars for unsafe conditions, explosions, major fires, and chemical leaks**, as the plant oozed chlorine and sulfur trioxide into Richmond's atmosphere. In August of 2012, **the Richmond refinery exploded** after Chevron ignored the warning of corroding pipes from the local safety board. The disaster was linked to aging pipes, which were simply clamped instead of replaced altogether. Some **15,000 residents in the surrounding area were forced to seek medical treatment**, and Chevron's CEO, John Watson, **got a \$7.5 million dollar raise**.

Now that some time has passed, Chevron has decided to modernize the refinery and has simultaneously sponsored the creation of the **Richmond Standard**, an online newspaper that is decidedly positive about anything the company does. The paper, whose name is a sly reference to the company that Chevron grew out of, covers minimally reported local stories on crime, public meetings, and sports. It also features a section called "**Chevron Speaks**," which works as a place for the company to put forth its ideology. **According to SF Gate**, "the idea of the nation's second-largest oil company funding a local news site harkens back to an era of journalism when business magnates often owned newspapers to promote their personal, financial, or political agendas. Now that mainstream newspapers are struggling to survive, online news sites are testing ways to fund their operations."

The founding of the *Standard* coincides with a modernization initiative at the facility that would allow it to process fuel with higher percentages of sulfur, the key to the corrosion that resulted in the 2012 plant explosion. "They're planning on doubling the sulfur content of the crude," Andres Soto, the Richmond community organizer at Communities for a Better Environment, told me.

According to Soto, Chevron wants to go from 1.5 percent sulfur content to 3 percent. Outside of the fear of another explosion, there is a serious environmental problem with the modernization and the refinery in general. "They're publically claiming there will be no net increase in emissions," he says. "Our suspicion is they plan on releasing more greenhouse and particulate emissions, here in the local area, in exchange for cap and trade."

For those of you unfamiliar with cap and trade, it's essentially when you let one of your refineries pollute above the federal limit in exchange for another refinery polluting below the federal limit. The differentials from "caps" are traded so that in the end everyone is supposed to be meeting requirements, on average. "It's the single largest refinery on the West Coast of the United States. As a facility, it's the single largest emitter of greenhouse gases in California," Andres says. He believes that the refinery will cause serious pollution in the Bay Area, and that the company will start using the port of Richmond to ship tar sands to China that aren't legal for fuel in the United States because of the sulfur content.

As you may have heard in relation to the **Keystone Pipeline proposals**, tar sands are semi-solid petroleum-and-sand mixtures that are being harvested in Alberta, Canada. The process of extracting the petroleum wastes a lot of water, and a **Yale article** reported last year that a company extracting petroleum used 370 million cubic meters of fresh water in 2011. Chevron could export the sands to China for their needs and save Americans time and resources, but Andres points out the emissions from shipping and the emissions China will create will circle back to America with the winds.

Chevron is attempting to convince the public that the refinery is a good idea in the pages of the *Richmond Standard*, typically using the **promise of more jobs** and more money. Andres says the company is buying every billboard in town. The billboards often depict people of color, likely in an effort to convince minorities that they can trust a multinational oil conglomerate.

Richmond is **about a quarter Latino and a third African American**, so there is a big population for Chevron to market to with these advertisements. Andres believes that, regardless of race, the low economic standing of many Richmond residents risks the town being subject to anything that creates jobs. He also believes that Richmond is becoming more progressive, and that people will hopefully spend more time educating themselves on the issues.

Not only is the company buying up all the billboards, but in 2010 the company spent **\$1.2 million** city council elections, and Andres claims they spent an additional \$2 million on the California state legislature. In November, five out of Richmond's seven council seats will be opening, including the mayor's seat, and that appears to be why they're plastering the town with billboards.

A company like Chevron is more than willing to spend all the money it can to ensure the operation of its biggest refinery in California. Whether it means starting a newspaper or sponsoring elections, they seem capable of doing anything necessary for their project. Chevron did not return my calls, but I'm sure they'd have plenty of jargon about jobs and economic growth for me. There may be a lot of jobs in oil, but there aren't any jobs at all when the town you live in is on fire.