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Chevron's Oil Spill Is Its Latest Injustice Foisted on Bay Area Communities

Molly Taft

As the pandemic drags on, some residents of the Bay Area faced a different kind of health emergency on Tuesday: an oil spill. Around 600 gallons of an oil-and-water mixture spilled from a Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, California into the San Francisco Bay, the company told local health authorities.

The company announced the spill on Wednesday afternoon, saying a “sheen was observed” (great passive voice, Chevron) on the water. Local media captured video footage of the slick spread across the waters of the bay as booms were deployed to corral it. The incident triggered a Level 2 health advisory from the local health department for residents of three surrounding communities, which was lifted later in the evening. Other agencies said that they are continuing the investigation this morning, especially watching for any impacts the spill might have on wildlife.

Nearby residents told local news outlets that they were angry that they were not notified sooner about the spill.

“It smelled like somebody spilled gasoline in front of my house...it smelled very very badly for [the] whole day,” Margaret Berczynski, a resident of the area, told ABC7. “I’m really devastated, I’m really devastated. I cannot take my kids to the water, I cannot walk on water, I cannot enjoy it. I’m really scared.”

Richmond is predominantly Black and Latinx, groups often exposed to higher levels of pollution, and as a result, face more health problems. Refineries like Chevron’s have historically been sited in communities of color, while other historic injustices such as redlining have locked in still more negative public health impacts today.

Indeed, the century-old facility original built by Standard Oil has a long and troubled history in the area. Between 1902 and 1987, the refinery dumped pollutants like mercury into a nearby bay with abandon. Since transferring to Chevron’s ownership in the 1980s, the facility has exploded three times—in 1989, 1999 and 2012—sending residents to seek medical care and prompting fines and lawsuits in the wake of each incident. In the aftermath of the 2012 fire, around 15,000 residents reported medical problems and sought treatment, including large numbers of respiratory problems.

The facility also uses flaring, a process of burning off gas to relieve pressure during the refining process. That also worries people living in the area. In 2019, the Richmond refinery had 39 reported flaring incidents, more than the flaring from four other facilities in the region combined.

“Regulators have allowed this refinery to foul our air again and again and again, and regulatory slaps on the wrist aren’t enough to protect the lungs of nearby residents,” Hollin Kretzmann, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, told KQED last year after reports of yet more smoke from the refinery in August.

Ironically, the recent spill came the same day that Chevron CEO told CNN that the company may back off oil and gas in the coming decades. It'd be nice if they didn't make a mess on their way out.