

Public Safety

## Fire At Chevron Refinery, Many Go to Hospitals

*A fire at the Chevron refinery in Richmond on Monday spewed a huge plume, prompted shelter-in-place warnings, sent many people to local hospitals with respiratory complaints and halted BART. A refinery worker had a minor injury.*

By Charles Burress August 6, 2012

Updated at 1:15 a.m., Aug. 7

A large fire erupted at the Chevron refinery around 6:30 p.m. in Richmond on Monday, spewing a huge plume visible for miles, prompting authorities to issue a shelter-in-place warning and causing a large number of people to flock to Doctors Medical Center in San Pablo and Kaiser hospital in Richmond with breathing problems.

Contra Costa Health Services activated its emergency phone notification system and issued a shelter-in-place warning for Richmond, North Richmond and San Pablo. Residents of those communities were urged to remain indoors, and to close all windows and doors and seal any cracks to protect the interior from outside air.

At 11:12 p.m., Health Services issued a notice saying the shelter-in-place advisory had been lifted. A "controlled burn" was continuing at the refinery, the notice said.

Chevron spokeswoman Heather Kulp told KRON TV at 10:28 p.m. that the fire had been fully contained. The station aired live coverage just before 11 p.m. showing firehoses still spraying water on the fire scene.

Another refinery spokesman, Nigel Hearne, issued an apology at an earlier news conference aired on KRON about 9:35 p.m. and said the cause of the 6:30 p.m. fire in the number 4 crude unit was unknown.

He also said one worker was treated at the refinery for a minor wrist burn, but Kulp later said the injury was smoke inhalation, not a burn.

Two columns of smoke with flames at their base could be seen from a long distance. Refinery officials said one was a flare burning off excess gas. The columns combined into a high-rising plume visible over large parts of the Bay Area.

KRON cited Chevron officials saying crews noticed a diesel seal had failed, causing fuel to spill inside the refinery. "Something, possibly heated metal, caused a spark that ignited the fuel and caused the fire," according to a KRON report.

Contra Costa Health Services said, "A diesel-like combustible liquid is burning at the refinery."

The fire occurred on the eve of Tuesday's opening of "Other Days, Other Ways: A Refinery Saga," an exhibit in Richmond that's dedicated to the 110th anniversary of the refinery.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said many people had gone to Doctors hospital with respiratory complaints, and KRON TV said the emergency room was "packed" with people experiencing breathing problems, burning eyes and irritation of mucous membranes.

The hospital said extra staff were called in, and that as of 11:30 p.m. about 200 people had sought treatment complaining of respiratory problems and that more continued to arrive. Kaiser Medical Center in Richmond also saw a jump in patients, sources said.

Contra Costa Health Services did not issue a shelter-in-place order for El Cerrito but did issue a health advisory for the city, saying that "people who smell smoke should consider staying inside or avoid the area, especially people with pre-existing respiratory problems."

Oakland police issued a community advisory for residents of the North Oakland hills, saying, "It is suggested to close all windows and doors. Turn off air conditioners. Bring in out door animals. At this time no further precautions are advised."

Kensington Police Chief Greg Harman said he had received a number of calls about the fire, and that there was no shelter-in-place for the township, but that police advised Kensington residents that they should stay indoors if they have concerns about smoke from the fire.

BART service experienced several interruptions. It was shut down between North Berkeley and Richmond, BART said at 8:43 p.m., with service to El Cerrito Plaza and del Norte restored about 9:45 p.m., BART said. Full service on the Richmond line was restored around 11:30 p.m.

All the toll-takers were removed from the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, according to KRON.

Reports conflicted over whether an explosion had occurred. KTVU cited "plant officials" saying there was no explosion and that there was a single fire and a single flare going off to burn off excess oil or fuel. Two distinct plumes could be seen from miles away in the early stages of fire, one with large flames at the base, possibly from a flare.

Gioia said his information from various sources reported an explosion. KTVU also said a KTVU reporter on scene said she heard alarms, a loud boom and saw a large black plume of smoke and flames. KCBS quoted a resident saying she heard more than one boom.

At one point in the fire, between 200 and 300 people had stopped on nearby Interstate 580 to take photos and videos, largely with cell phones, according to KCBS.

Inspectors from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District were on scene taking air samples to test for potentially hazardous chemicals, Gioia said.

The dark smoke plumes were seen going east in the area over San Pablo and San Pablo Dam Road, KCBS said.

The large plume had partly dissipated by shortly after 8 p.m., KCBS reported.

In addition to the refinery's own firefighters, the El Cerrito and Richmond fire departments along with a hazardous materials unit from Contra Costa County responded to the scene, Gioia said. Other nearby fire departments also were reported to have responded..