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Chevron pipe was in bad shape, feds say

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Marie Harrison (speaking) of Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice is joined by Richmond residents as she speaks to the board. Bay Area Air Quality Control Board meet in special session to discuss the agency's response to the Chevron refinery fire. Monday September 10th, 2012 Photo: Michael Short, Special To The Chronicle / SF

Federal officials investigating the Chevron refinery fire in Richmond say they have removed an 8-foot section of the pipe that had thinned dangerously before it failed last month and have sent it to a private materials lab to be analyzed.

[U.S. Chemical Safety Board](#) investigators observed that the wall of the 5/16th-inch-thick, 8-inch-diameter pipe leading away from the No. 4 Crude Unit had "lost most of its original thickness." They said Monday that the section will be analyzed for corrosion or other factors that may have led to its rupture and the Aug. 6 fireball.

Don Holmstrom, the Chemical Safety Board's western regional manager, said the probe will focus on whether Chevron followed industry standards in deciding to leave the pipe in place last year when the refinery was shut down for maintenance.

Chevron decided to replace a nearby 12-inch-diameter line during that refinery shutdown because it was corroded. The company considered replacing the 8-inch line but in the end kept the pipe in place.

Holmstrom said the federal investigators were still trying to determine how badly thinned the pipe was last year when Chevron made the initial decision to replace it.

A source close to the investigation said the pipe had lost roughly 80 percent of its wall thickness near the spot that ruptured, leaving about 1/16th of an inch of its wall remaining in some locations.

Holmstrom said federal investigators are also looking at whether regulators, notably the state's [Division of Occupational Safety and Health](#), exercised proper oversight of the refinery operation.

Few inspections found

A recent federal audit found that Cal/OSHA's industrial process safety unit was conducting "very few, if any" comprehensive workplace-safety inspections of refineries and chemical plants in the state. A Chronicle review found that what inspections the state has performed have not resulted in a single fine against a major oil company.

Also Monday, Bay Area air quality regulators pledged to improve the way they measure emissions from refineries and other industrial polluters, particularly during disasters.

More than 15,000 people sought medical attention after the Chevron fire, but the Bay Area [Air Quality Management District](#) had few tools to analyze the smoke and provide real-time data to first responders and residents.

The agency's backbone network of air monitors is designed to track everyday levels of pollutants like ozone, part of an effort to meet government health standards.

"I think there's room for improvement," said district board chairman [John Gioia](#), a Contra Costa County supervisor who lives in Richmond. "It's better to err on the side of giving more information. But the challenge is to provide understandable and meaningful information that people can use."

Looking to Chevron

Gioia said he expected Chevron and other companies to pay for all upgrades.

District officials said they had already speeded up the planned installation of a new air monitor in San Pablo that, by the end of the year, will give hourly measurements of particulate matter - the material that health officials believe caused much of the sickness last month.

Currently, the nearest monitors of this kind are in Oakland, Vallejo and San Rafael.

The officials said they will convene a panel of experts to weigh in on ideas for improved monitoring, including balloons and drones that could analyze a plume of smoke.

[Henry Clark](#), who heads the nonprofit group [West County Toxics Coalition](#) in Richmond, told the board it should have beefed up its monitoring of refineries years ago.

"We've been talking about monitoring in our community for more than 30 years," Clark said. "We need to get some real results this time."