



Health officials release new numbers about Chevron fire

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 by Nick Smith

RICHMOND, Calif. (KGO) -- More than two weeks after the Chevron Refinery fire in Richmond, there are still questions about what exactly was in the smoke that blanketed much of the East Bay. On Tuesday health officials and hazmat reported back to county supervisors.

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors had a lot of questions for health officials. They wanted to know exactly what chemicals were released into the air during the Chevron Refinery Fire and why it took so long to notify those who lived in areas that were ordered to shelter in place.

Contra Costa County health officials gave an oral report to the Board of Supervisors and released new numbers.

"I have an update for you today in that over 14,000 people have sought emergency department evaluation," said Contra Costa Public Health officer William Walker, M.D.

"That's 5,000 more than health officials reported last week and they say the majority of those seeking treatment had complained of difficulty breathing and eye irritation. Most were treated and released, but three were hospitalized. Walker said, "Two at Children's Hospital and one at Kaiser."

Results from air samples collected by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and Contra Costa County Health, are expected sometime this week and may provide more detail on what was released into the air but, there were other problems.

"We hear from people who personally experience it," said Contra Costa District 1 Supervisor John Gioia.

There was a failure with the county's telephone emergency notification system.

"People have developed a high expectation that we're going to call them pretty quickly with accurate information," said Gioia.

It took more than three hours for the automated warning to contact some of the residents living in areas that were under a shelter-in-place order.

Officials blame the problem on a vendor promising a service they could not deliver. CityWatch - the product used to make the emergency calls for Contra Costa County became delayed when it dialed numbers where there was no answer and no answering machine. The system is programmed to redial that number until someone is reached, that caused a bottle neck effect. Officials say that

affected 25 percent or 20,000 of the calls that went out. Whatever the cause, Gioia said the result was unacceptable.

"We need to reopen the process, look at vendors, hold them to a high standard and do a better job than what's been done the last few times," said Gioia.

County service officials say the issue may not be with the vendor, but rather simply the way the phones are designed to work.

"There were some issues with this one, there were issues with our past vendors, there would be issues with future vendors. It's the nature of that particular warning device - again the telephone lines, the landlines," said Katherine Hern from the Contra Costa Warning System Division.

Officials are meeting with the vendor for the county's emergency notification system this week. Should the county choose to switch providers, it won't cost taxpayers a dime. The oil and chemical industries are responsible for the cost of the emergency network system in Contra Costa County.

Chevron Help Center information:

Chevron is opening a help center in North Richmond on Wednesday, Aug. 22 through Friday August 24, to assist residents who want to file claims related to the August 6, 2012 incident.

Location:

North Richmond Community Heritage Senior Apartments in the Community Room
1555 Fred Jackson Way
Richmond, CA 94801

Hours of operation:

9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., Wednesday through Friday (Aug. 22-Aug. 24)

Additionally, the last day to make a claim at the Help Center at the Nevin Community Center is Saturday August 25. The Help center will remain open until Friday, Aug. 31 for people to submit requested documentation for their claims in person, but they will not be accepting new claims.

Live operators are also available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for those wishing to file a claim by phone. The number is 866-260-7881.

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