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CoCo County to conduct safety audit on Chevron refinery



U.S. Chemical Safety Board failed pipe Chevron Refinery fire Aug 14

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RICHMOND, Calif. —

Contra Costa County officials announced Friday that they plan to conduct an extensive safety audit of Chevron's Richmond refinery where a major fire occurred in August, even as officials raised questions about the ability of regulators to effectively monitor such facilities.

The county sent a letter to Chevron today stating its intention to inspect and evaluate the refinery's safety culture and practices, Supervisor John Gioia said Friday at a hearing in Richmond on the refinery fire. The hearing, led by state Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Oakland, and Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, included reports from Cal/OSHA and other regulatory agencies on the fire investigation and regulatory response.

The Aug. 6, 2012, fire injured six people and sent a plume of toxic smoke into the air that caused more than 15,000 people to go to area hospitals complaining of breathing problems.

The fire was sparked by a rupture in a corroded pipe that Chevron had known about since 2002, but failed to repair or report to safety regulators until after the fire, state regulators testified at the hearing.

"The corroded pipe at the refinery is just a red flag for the safety culture at the refinery," Gioia said.

The county safety audit process announced Friday has only been used three times in the past 15 years, and the last time was in 2003, according to

Randy Sawyer, the county's chief environmental health and hazardous materials officer.

The audit would be conducted by a consultant, to be paid for by Chevron, and an oversight committee created in cooperation with the City of Richmond, Sawyer said. It could take around six months to complete.

The county's move to review the plant's safety management system came the same day that the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health lifted the order prohibiting use at Chevron's Crude Unit .4, according to agency spokesman Peter Melton.

The order was lifted after what the agency called an extensive assessment of the unit by three members of the agency's Process Safety Management staff and an inspector from Contra Costa County.

Chevron officials welcomed the decision, saying they had worked more than 1.2 million hours over the past 242 days to repair the crude unit.

"We have also implemented a number of actions based on the preliminary findings from our investigation of the incident in order to strengthen safety and reliability of the refinery," Chevron said in a statement.

The lifting of the order should not, however, be interpreted as an endorsement of the safety of the entire refinery, Cal/OSHA chief Ellen Widess told Hancock and Skinner Friday.

Widess and officials from the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board today told the representatives that inadequate staffing and budget cuts hampered the ability of regulatory agencies to adequately inspect refineries in California. Widess noted that similar corrosion had been found at another Chevron facility since the fire and might be a widespread problem, but Cal/OSHA's seven inspectors did not have the resources to check every refinery.

"I take from this that we absolutely need more resources within OSHA, that seven staff are not enough staff," Skinner said.

Cal/OSHA fined Chevron \$963,200 in January, the agency's largest fine and the maximum legally allowed, for 25 alleged worker safety violations that occurred before, during and after the pipeline rupture.

Chevron has said it will appeal some of the citations, but a hearing date has not been set, officials said Friday.

Hancock and Skinner both announced bills in February in response to the refinery fire. Hancock's Senate Bill 691 would raise the civil penalties that air polluters must pay for air quality regulation violations, while Skinner's Assembly Bill 1165 would require unsafe conditions at refineries to be corrected quickly even if the company was appealing air quality violation citations