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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

### Chemical stockpiles raise terror attack concerns

- Erin Hallissy, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Although Contra Costa County is considered by many Bay Area residents to be a suburban community, chemical plants and refineries along its waterfront from Richmond to Antioch make it the second most industrialized area in California -- and a potential target for a terrorist attack, a new congressional report released Wednesday says.

But officials from county government and industry say they started strengthening security at the plants years ago -- even before Sept. 11, 2001 -- and have worked to reduce the stores of hazardous materials that present risks to surrounding neighborhoods.

"In this day and age, I feel as if both the federal government and the local government are doing enough with the resources they have," said county Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier of Concord, whose district includes the Tesoro Golden Eagle refinery east of Martinez. "Whether you can be perfectly safe, I'm not sure it's possible. There are no guarantees in life."

The report released Wednesday by U.S. Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., shows that California has 11 to 13 facilities where a worst-case scenario chemical release could affect more than 1 million people. It does not give the exact location of the facilities, but local authorities say Contra Costa County is second only to Los Angeles County in the number of industrial facilities that must file risk management plans to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency because of hazardous materials.

The report also does not specify what can bring about a worst-case scenario at one of the facilities.

The General Chemical Corp. plant in Bay Point in 1999 showed its worst-case catastrophe could affect a 25-mile "vulnerability zone" where 1.5 million people live. The plant has 180,000 pounds of hydrogen fluoride/hydrofluoric acid.

Randy Sawyer, director of Contra Costa County's hazardous materials programs, said the chemical, used to make high purity acids needed by the electronics industry to produce silicon chips, is "very toxic" and can cause pulmonary damage and take calcium out of bones if it's absorbed through the skin.

A spokesperson for General Chemical could not be reached for comment, but industry officials say worst-case scenarios are highly unlikely and don't take into account safety measures such as automatic turnoff valves and security response.

"Industry in general has done a good job in minimizing the risks through minimizing the hazardous materials they have on site at any time," said Scott Anderson, executive director of the Industrial Association of Contra Costa County, an industry group. Anderson also lauded increased security measures at plants. "It is many times harder to gain access to an oil refinery here in Contra Costa County than it was for me to gain access (recently) to a major Army base," he said. "The security measures here are extremely stronger."

Jeff Wilson, a Los Angeles-based spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association, said there were more fence-line monitoring, video surveillance and security barriers at all refineries in the state.

"The refineries in California, both in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, adhere to the most rigid local, state and federal guidelines that exist anywhere else in the world," he said. "It's how you do business in California."

Dean O'Hair, spokesman for Chevron's Richmond refinery, the largest in Northern California with a capacity for refining 240,000 barrels of crude oil a day, said that various security agencies had scoured the plant and that enhanced security measures had utilized their input. Also, the U.S. Coast Guard is now establishing 100-yard security perimeters around wharves belonging to refineries and chemical plants, which will also guard against attacks.

"In terms of facility security, things are much improved since 9/11," O'Hair said.

Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond said Contra Costa County had imposed stricter regulations on industries there than other places because of concerns raised by politicians, residents and community activists.

"The county's industrial safety ordinance goes far beyond the federal and state requirements," he said. "There are plenty of targets which could do great harm in Contra Costa, but the Sheriff's Department, the Office of Emergency Services and the owners of these facilities also know that they can be a target, and they are proactive."

The county also saw a 54 percent decrease between 1990 and 1997 in acutely hazardous materials at industrial plants, Sawyer said. The county has 2,300 facilities, from dry cleaners and gas stations to chemical companies and refineries, that now report having a combined total of 9 billion pounds of chemicals. Those can include carbon dioxide used in dry ice, chlorine for pools or water treatment plants, ammonia at chemical factories and crude oil and gasoline at refineries.

Anderson used to work at Dow Chemical, whose Pittsburg plant filed a worst-case scenario in June 2004 that said there were 180,000 pounds of chlorine at the plant that if released could travel 25 miles and potentially affect 910,000 people. He said the risks were minuscule that a disaster could happen.

"I know the kinds of safeguards that each one of the facilities has in effect," he said. Workers "live here, they worship here, their families are here. They wouldn't do anything to impact their families and friends. I feel more risk being on Highway 4 than I do from any of the industries in the area."

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