

Labor and environmental groups join forces on refinery issues



Last August's fire at the Chevron refinery in Richmond helped spark a new collaborative on refinery safety -- one that includes both the steelworkers' union and environmental advocacy groups. (Photo by: Sara Bernard)

By [Sara Bernard](#) Posted February 20, 2013 9:00 am



Representatives from the Asian Pacific Environmental Network spoke at Chevron's gates at a rally in October 2012. (Photo by: Sara Bernard)

The fire at Richmond's Chevron oil refinery on August 6, 2012 wasn't the only reason the United Steelworkers union and several environmental organizations—disparate groups that rarely work in tandem—decided to join forces in an industry-wide conversation about health and safety, but it was certainly an accelerating factor.

“Absolutely, that spurred us,” said Charlotte Brody, national associate director of the BlueGreen Alliance, a coalition of labor unions and environmental groups that advocate for a green economy and safer workplaces. “It was a good idea waiting for an opportunity to happen.”

While it's been in the works for over a year, Richmond's new labor-community collaborative, soon to be named the Collaborative on Refinery Safety and Community Health, officially launched on January 30. It includes the steelworkers' union, the BlueGreen Alliance, and the Labor Occupational Health Program at UC Berkeley, as well as one national and two Bay Area-based environmental groups: the National Resources Defense Council, Communities for a Better Environment and the Asian Pacific Environmental Network.

Although the member groups differ considerably in their goals and agendas, they agree that they want to hold oil companies accountable for keeping refineries—and therefore workers and surrounding communities—safe. The August fire sent 15,000 people to area hospitals and Chevron reported earlier this month that so far it has paid \$10 million in medical compensation claims. But according to the 25 citations issued by California's division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) in February—which amount to the largest fines the regulatory agency is allowed to issue under state law—the accident was preventable, and Chevron did not uphold its own emergency and safety procedures that could have better protected its employees.

“There’s a whole set of recommendations that we want to see happen,” said Mike Wilson, the director of the Labor Occupational Health Program, who believes that the nearly \$1 million in fines Cal/OSHA levied against Chevron for what it called “willful” and “serious” safety violations is a small price to pay for a corporation of its size and wealth. “A million dollar fine is like beer money to them,” he said.

But since Chevron has announced that the company intends to appeal the citations, and “appeals can last two years,” Wilson said, “they don’t have to do anything to abate the violations. It’s outrageous.”

The collaborative’s immediate and specific recommendations include better air emissions reporting and a more thorough assessment of pipe corrosion damage at oil refineries. Overall, though, members intend to advocate for worker and community safety—and the public’s right to know about and to participate in that advocacy—to industry giants as well as government agencies.

This isn’t the first time labor unions and environmental groups have worked together; the BlueGreen Alliance is a partnership between the nation’s 14 largest labor and environmental groups and Communities for a Better Environment has done some work with the steelworkers’ union in the past. But it’s their first attempt at this level of organization, and “the first in this detail and this depth,” said Mike Smith, staff representative for United Steelworkers Local 5, a chapter that represents about 1,500 Bay Area refinery employees.

Despite historical tensions between refinery employees and the groups that protest refinery practices, members of the collaborative say their concerns overlap. “We do share common interests,” said Smith. “Our workers, we’re the front line. If we’re safe inside, then the community around the refinery will also be. So we thought it was probably time to sit down and talk about our similarities, rather than our differences.”

One major goal is to debunk claims that environmental concerns usually come at the expense of jobs, said Communities for a Better Environment organizer Andres Soto. “That’s not the case. Part of the point of this collaborative is to destroy that myth,” he said.

It’s about “community protection and environmental health,” agreed Wilson. “That’s what we’re going to stand for and we’re not going to sacrifice one for the other.”

The group has already attracted the attention of the Chemical Safety Board, Cal/OSHA, and even Governor Jerry Brown, who put together a state-level refinery safety task force last fall following the August fire. The task force was “organized to better coordinate state agency programs and activities related to regulating the state’s refineries,” said Elizabeth Ashford, a spokesperson for the governor.

So far, the collaborative and the governor’s task force have met several times. Ashford said the governor’s task force “could consider or review recommendations for regulatory or statutory changes” the group makes regarding how government oversees the refinery industry.

“Refineries could be pretty good neighbors if [companies] were running them right,” said the BlueGreen Alliance’s Brody, pointing out that stricter safety and maintenance regulations for European refineries have far better track records in terms of accidents and fires. In some cases, she said, these refineries belong to the very same companies that operate less safely here. “And they’re not taking huge losses for doing that,” she said. “This is a known universe. We know how to make refineries safer.”

Bringing any coalition of disparate organizations to the same table is complex, but that’s why Brody thinks the collaborative has a vital role to play. “If this was easy to do, if we could ‘Kumbaya’ our way into consensus in ten minutes or less, the potential of this collaboration wouldn’t be so powerful,” Brody said. “Of course it’s difficult, but the potential is so great.”

The group’s work is currently anchored in Richmond, but they hope its reach will eventually extend across Northern California, or even farther. The August fire in Richmond “provided some opportunities for our immediate focus,” said Greg Karras, senior scientist at Communities for a Better Environment, “but its scope is regional. We’re talking about all the Bay Area refineries directly—and indirectly, about all refineries in the country.”

As a next step, the collaborative plans to hold a public forum on February 27 at the St. Mark’s Catholic Church gym in Richmond, starting at 6:30 pm. This will be the first effort of the collaborative to facilitate public discussion, something that Karras sees as its most important task. It’s time, he said, to ask the public “to be the real leaders and to tell us what to do.”