

Richmond Refinery Fire Unites Communities Divided

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RICHMOND, Calif. – Standing on the dock next to her houseboat in affluent Sausalito, Calif., around dinnertime on Aug. 6, Lovise Mills watched a thick, black cloud of smoke pouring into the sky, partially hidden behind the hills that ring her picturesque community.

Stunned, Mills took pictures and posted them on Facebook. “What the hell is *that*?” she asked.

Ten miles across San Francisco Bay, Christina Saeteurn, 22, watched the same cloud. Saeteurn grew up in public housing in North Richmond and went to school in the shadow of the smokestacks, pipes and tanks of Chevron’s Richmond Refinery. She knew exactly what “that” was.



Lovise Mills took this picture from the dock next to her Sausalito house boat the evening of the Chevron Refinery fire. A massive vapor cloud, leaking from an old pipe at the refinery, had filled the evening sky and then ignited.

“When you looked outside, the sky was completely black,” Saeteurn said. “It looked like something out of a science fiction book or movie. You could smell the fumes; it is a weird smell. It smelled toxic.

“The explosion was horrible – I wish it had never happened – but it opened a lot of eyes of people outside of Richmond, people who never acknowledged the problem of the refinery before,” said Saeteurn.

The sooty cloud seen for miles sent a message to families throughout the region, and organizers hope the new awareness will provide a rallying point for pressuring politicians and pushing Chevron toward safer operation.

The 110-year-old refinery covers 2,900 acres; its smokestacks are as tall as skyscrapers. The hundreds of tanks nestled around the refinery can hold up to 15 million barrels of its main products: gasoline, jet fuel and diesel fuel.

Like many others, Mills, 44, drives past the massive refinery on the freeway almost daily, on her way to school in Berkeley, never really thinking about it.

“I assumed it was safe,” she said.

That August evening, as the fire burned, families living miles from the refinery were suddenly confronted by its reality – in their homes and their own backyards. Smoke floated into the sprawling houses in the hills.

The morning after the fire, an oily residue and smoke particles speckled playground equipment, vegetable gardens, cars and patio furniture miles from the refinery. Anger grew over the lack of warning, information or explanation.

“Suddenly people from so many other cities were coming together with Richmond. They were calling the news programs; they were outraged. It was great,” said Saeteurn. “Now people see that the Chevron refinery doesn’t just affect us, it also affects them. People are really concerned.”

Nearly 1,000 people attended a community meeting in Richmond the day after the fire. Chevron quickly acknowledged its responsibility for the fire, apologized and opened a claims center to reimburse families for medical expenses.

Within two weeks, nearly 15,000 people had visited emergency rooms with respiratory complaints, burning eyes, sore throats and headaches. Many others didn’t see a doctor, but complained of feeling tired and having trouble concentrating for days after the fire.

Lawyers filed lawsuits against Chevron, citing negligence by the company.

“With a disaster of this scale, people who are traditionally not impacted suddenly get it. They understand that this really is a false choice that we are offering families,” said Jakada Imani, executive director of the Ella Baker Center in nearby Oakland, an organization that works to empower low-income families and communities.

“You can’t ask people to choose between their health and someone else’s profit,” he said. “Legislators throughout the state have to understand the health issues here, and understand that it is unsustainable.”

Richmond’s poorest families have lived in public housing at the edge of the refinery for decades, dashing into their houses when alarms signaled a spill or leak, shutting doors and windows and stuffing towels into any gaps.

Mills said she was stunned to hear that Richmond residents were told to seal their doors and windows with duct tape after the explosion.

“That struck me as simplistic, not very well thought through. It doesn’t sound like a rational thing to say to your community,” she said.

To Christina Saeteurn and her sister, Sandy Saeteurn, who grew up in Richmond and are now organizers with the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, the instructions were all too familiar.

Christina remembers the drills at Peres Elementary School, less than a mile from the refinery, when she was a student there. When an alarm signaled an incident at the refinery, the teachers would rush to shut the doors and windows. Students were instructed to cover their faces with a tissue.

Once when there was a leak at the refinery, Saeteurn says students were quickly loaded onto school buses and driven out of the area. She remembers just riding around and around on the bus the whole day as it avoided the area around the school and refinery.

As a kid I didn't realize how weird that was," said Saeteurn. "Growing up, I knew a lot of kids who had asthma. Personally, I think I'm okay, but I don't know what the long-term effects could be."

Her sister, Sandy, was one of the many children who suffered symptoms while living next to the refinery.



The massive Chevron Richmond Refinery fire on August 6 could be seen for miles around, prompting concern and outcry throughout Contra Costa and other neighboring counties. Photo courtesy of Asian Pacific Environmental Network
"There were incidents at the refinery when I was little, when they would have a spill," said Sandy, 29. "I would get so sick that I would have to go to the hospital. My eyes swelled almost closed, and my body would be covered in hives."

Her mother would take her to the hospital and send the bills to Chevron. Chevron paid the medical costs and would also send an extra \$100, sometimes even \$1,000 to Saeteurn's mother to be put in a trust fund for Sandy until she was 18.

When she grew up, Saeteurn realized to her horror that Chevron was buying the silence of families.

"I was angry. I was enraged. Our health is not for sale," she said.

Low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately burdened with the dirtiest or most dangerous industries – refineries, factories, agricultural chemicals and pesticides. Studies show that environmental regulations are ignored or poorly enforced in minority neighborhoods.

It is no different in North Richmond, where 80 percent of the families are Latino, African-American or Asian. Nearly 30 percent of the households are below the poverty line.

During the Aug. 6 fire, emergency alarms, warning systems and advisories failed. Reports indicate that air-quality testing around the refinery during the fire was insufficient.

“These are heart-wrenching stories,” said Marty Otañez, an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Denver, where he teaches a course on environmental injustice.

“We as consumers are so disengaged. It is such an injustice. How did the situation get to the point where a corporation can write a check and belittle all the health problems this person might suffer for the rest of their life? Phony corporate social responsibility,” he said.

During the summer, Otañez lives in Marin County – the same county where Lovise Mills lives. Just across the bay from Richmond, Marin is the third wealthiest county in the state; even so, about 7 percent of Marin County residents live below the poverty line.

Otañez says most Marin residents are happy to keep their distance from Richmond, which is poor and perceived as dangerous. But he agrees with Saeteurn that the fire could be “a learning moment” that galvanizes the greater community and overcomes the cultural distance.

“The fire is something that people who don’t live in the immediate community can understand. When they are at the gas pump, filling up, they can be reminded of how gasoline in the car is directly connected to the health of families.

“The message must be clear that we no longer welcome a corporation like Chevron in our community if it continuously harms people,” said Otañez.

That’s just what organizers hope to do. With so many people seeing or experiencing the thick smoke – including those living in wealthier ZIP Codes – they plan to build on the momentum.

The Richmond refinery is one of the largest in the United States. Chevron is the biggest employer in Richmond, providing jobs for more than 1,200 workers and contributing millions of tax dollars to the economy – including paying the city of Richmond \$28 million in back taxes in 2009.

In 2010, Chevron contributed \$10 million to state and local political campaigns. It also routinely pays millions of dollars in fines for violating clean air regulations.

As unlikely as it seems, activists have won significant community victories against the corporate giant.

Three years ago, Richmond residents convinced Contra Costa County Superior Court to stop Chevron from expanding the refinery. Many feared refining thick, gritty tar sand oil would pump dangerous chemicals into the air – and increase the chance of fires and explosions.

Christina Saeteurn helped mobilize other young leaders to successfully fight the expansion.

It was a powerful win. Richmond residents followed up on the victory by re-electing an environmentalist mayor and two progressive council members.

Now, with the new awareness, keeping the Chevron refinery a Richmond-only issue would be a mistake, says Valerie Yerger, who lives in Richmond. She said she felt fatigued and foggy for a week after the fire.

“We have to get others in the region to see that what is affecting us in Richmond is also affecting them – that it can go into their homes just like it goes in our homes, and it can touch their kids,” Yerger said.

“No one cares about crack cocaine [when it’s] in Richmond, but when it finds its way into the white neighborhoods, then it is suddenly a big issue,” she said.

“If the fire makes the health concerns about the refinery a bigger issue, that is beneficial to everyone.”

For some, a reliable regional alarm system that warns of a leak or toxic fire should be the first step.

The night of the fire, Farm Ian Saechao, a refugee from Laos who lives near the refinery, was at the laundromat washing clothes. Like many others, she heard no sirens or alarm. The next day she was so ill, her doctor sent her to the emergency room.

Others, like Parin Shah, senior strategist at Asian Pacific Environmental Network, agree that an effective warning system is important, but he says it is just a Band-Aid on the bigger issue.

“The much larger problem is this remarkably volatile refinery right next to homes and schools and the significant health concerns connected with it,” Shah said.

“Given the financial, environmental and health impacts, it’s time to transition to clean energy, solar power, wind power, light rail and alternative modes of transportation,” he said.

“Richmond has carried this disproportionate burden for decades. We’ve had a period of opportunity for a few; now, we are talking about building success for all with a new green economy.”

Some, like Mills, wonder if it is even possible to consider such a regional conversation.

“If you live in Marin County, you wouldn’t ever dream of living in Richmond,” she said. “I’m not wishing toxic smoke on anyone, and I feel bad for the people who were affected, but where do we take it from here?”

“I don’t like that the refinery is there, but at the same time, I have a car, I use gasoline, and I can’t be a hypocrite about it,” she said.

“I hope no one got very ill or very sick,” she said. “Maybe this is what it takes to get us shaken up.”

