

Air district investigates smoke from Richmond metal scrapyards fire

By RICK HURD | rhurd@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: February 1, 2018 at 12:59 pm | UPDATED: February 2, 2018 at 3:54 am

RICHMOND — The city's mayor described the conditions from this week's metal scrapyards fire as some of the worst he's experienced in 45 years and a county supervisor didn't disagree.

The smoke from Tuesday's two-alarm blaze prompted a 10-hour shelter-in-place for residents in the area. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District will investigate whether particulates were present that were too dangerous to breathe, and whether Sims Metal Management, a metal and electronic recycling facility, may face fines for violations, officials said.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who sits on the air district board, said some of the readings he's already seen indicate levels of toxic air matter that for periods of time were similar to the readings during the North Bay fires in October.

The air district will investigate whether particulates were released that were too dangerous to breathe, and whether Sims, a metal and electronic recycling facility, should face fines for violations.

"We are doing an investigation," Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said. "I've asked them to send me the most recent information about the readings from the smoke and the fire, because many people in Richmond believe this is the worst smoke from a fire in decades."

It's not known how long the investigation will take. The air district said it had five inspectors and a supervisor surveying the scene.



Smoke is seen coming from the Sims Metal Management property in this view from Cutting Boulevard as a scrap metal fire burns Richmond, Calif., on Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2018. Smoke was visible for miles and authorities warned residents to stay indoors. (Courtesy of Henna Papineau) Gioia said he believes the smoke from Tuesday's fire to be worse than the [Aug. 6, 2012, Chevron blaze](#) that endangered 19 refinery workers and sent 15,000 residents to hospitals.

“So far, we know that metal was burning and probably plastics that were among the metal,” Gioia said. “And probably fuel, too, though that has yet to be determined. There may be violations. There may be fines. Clearly there were emissions on that pile that should not have occurred.”

The fire on Tuesday started around 5:08 p.m. in a recycling pile at the company's Richmond plant, located at 600 S. Fourth St., officials said. Smoke from the fire billowed hundreds of feet into the air and was visible for miles.

There were no reported injuries from the fire either at the plant or from the smoke, officials said. The cause of the fire has not been determined.

“It was difficult to breathe,” Richmond Mayor Tom Butt said. “This is the worst smoke I've endured since I moved to Richmond in 1973, far worse than the Chevron fire.”

Butt also questioned the amount of time it took for the Contra Costa Sheriff's Office emergency alert system to be activated and to alert the public. Sims Metal Management contacted emergency dispatchers about the fire at 5:08 p.m., and social media posts show that smoke was rising high by 5:18 p.m.

Richmond fire crews arrived on scene at 5:17 p.m., and by 5:22 p.m., Battalion Chief Aaron Osorio said he put out a request for shelter-in-place for the Nystrom Village neighborhood. He said he also sent out another request at 5:18 p.m. for

the Santa Fe and Iron Triangle neighborhoods, and a final one at 5:48 p.m. for areas of Point Richmond.

“I sent out three requests for alerts through the county, because there were three wind shifts,” Osorio said.

In a statement, Sheriff’s Office spokesman Jimmy Lee said the agency “received all of the necessary information from Richmond Fire for an alert at 5:55 p.m.

Butt said he was not alerted on his cell phone until 6:20 p.m. — 25 minutes after the county sent out its first warning.

“We want to assure members of the public that we will continue to be a valuable member of the community and to maintain our rigorous standards,” Sims Metal Management spokeswoman Jill Rodby said in a statement. “We will be able to have a better understanding of what happened and how best to mitigate the risks once we have completed the evaluation of how the fire began and its root cause. We expect to be transparent in that process.”