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Where There's Smoke, There's Toxic Fire

Richmond's Sims Metal fire and the response to it spark demands for change.

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- [Courtesy of Isabelle Murphy](#)
- The Sims fire was close to multiple Richmond industrial sites.

On Jan. 30, multiple Richmond neighborhoods became enveloped in a heavy, black cloud of toxic smoke. The fire had sparked at the Sims Metal Management facility at 600 S. 4th St., and it prompted a shelter-in-place order that lasted nearly 11 hours.

In the weeks following the blaze, residents, elected officials, and environmental groups have raised serious questions and concerns about Sims' handling of flammable materials and its lack of preparation for dealing with industrial fires. The timeline and method of notifying residents about the shelter-in-place, the Richmond Fire Department's response to the fire, and the Bay Area Air Quality Managements District's monitoring of the potential public health impacts have also come under criticism.

The fire and the response to it are of particular significance because of the Sims facility's close proximity to multiple Richmond industrial sites, said Greg Karras, senior scientist at [Communities for a Better Environment \(CBE\)](#). "We should look at this as a warning flare," said Karras, pointing to the storage of coal and petcoke, as well as oil and flammable chemicals, in the same immediate area — creating the potential for a major disaster.

Critics of Sims' preparation point out that by its own admission, the scrapyards has no fire-suppression foam on site, and its employees were not trained in hazmat procedures. The company's initial public statements about the fire were also misleading. Sims originally said the stockpile that ignited consisted of "light iron" recyclable metal, and then did not clarify until later that the stockpile also included plastics and other highly toxic substances. Sims is a large company with facilities around the globe, including 114 scrapyards in the U.S. alone, and has experienced similar fires repeatedly, including two in Redwood City in 2013 and another in Hayward in 2014.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt has been sharply critical of the Richmond Fire Department, the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department, and the Contra Costa Warning System for not notifying the public promptly about the fire and for choosing not to employ the county's siren warning system. Instead, officials used Twitter and other social media sites and "Reverse 911" to alert residents, despite the fact that many people either do not use social media or do not have land lines. CBE and others have also criticized RFD's decision to spray water on the burning stockpile at Sims, noting that it caused the smoke plume to turn into a cloud that then spread across several neighborhoods.

The air district and the Contra Costa County Health Department have maintained so far that the was fire and cloud posed no serious health risks to residents but acknowledged that air samples taken "in close proximity" to the fire found high levels of benzene, a known

carcinogen, and high particulate levels throughout the night. Karras said the "monitoring is far from sufficient to prove that there is no risk, and the monitoring that exists is being misinterpreted."

In response to criticism, a Sims spokesperson stated, "Sims has spent considerable time and effort in consideration of proper preparations needed to respond to fires at its facilities." When asked about Sims' procedures and preparation, Richmond Fire Chief Adrian Sheppard responded that the department is reviewing the situation.

Sheppard also defended RFD's decision to not use the community siren and the methods the department employed to fight the fire. He said he believes that social media alerts and calling landlines were sufficient. He also said that it's not realistic for RFD to know exactly how to deal with metal scrapyard fires. "While we do train to all conceivable incident types, it would be virtually impossible for us to burn a pile of metal for training purposes," he said.

Contra Costa County supervisor and air district board member John Gioia said the air district is conducting "a full investigation."

At a community meeting called by Sims on Feb. 7, many residents expressed warm support for the company and disparaged those calling for more oversight. "Sims Metal Management are our friends, family, and neighbors," said Iron Triangle neighborhood resident Chonti Scotty. "This company has contributed so much and has heavily invested in this city. In my opinion [Sims] keeps the materials they work with and handle well-contained. The company would not be in business today if they didn't know what they were doing."

But, said Karras, multiple Sims fires have made it apparent that "mixing flammable petrochemical materials with metals and then neglecting it" will result in ignition.

Richmond City Councilmember Jael Myrick, a resident of the Santa Fe neighborhood, which was highly impacted by the fire's smoke, said, "it is absolutely the responsibility of Sims to plan for and be prepared for incidents like this, particularly considering their history with similar incidents around the Bay Area."

Point Richmond resident and business owner Daniel Butt (son of Mayor Tom Butt) said he believes Sims has significant local backing because it spends a lot of money supporting

Richmond community programs. "In the 1990s, Chevron enjoyed the same reputation in the Richmond community that Sims now does," he said.

In terms of fighting the fire, CBE's Andres Soto said it's standard procedure to use foam, rather than water, on metal fires, to smother them and keep the dense toxic smoke cloud from spreading. But foam wasn't used on the Sims fire until Chevron fire crews and other members of a "petrochemical mutual aid response team" that includes Shell, Phillips 66, Andeavor, and Dow arrived to provide support.

Even the size of the stockpile that burned has been obfuscated, with Sims initially calling it a 20-foot pile and Sheppard later stating that it could not "have been higher than 35 feet." But Chevron's online media outlet, the Richmond Standard, reported Sheppard stating the pile was a "mound of scrap metal 40 to 50 feet in height."

As far as employing the siren warning system to alert residents, "that should have been a no-brainer," said Daniel Butt.

At the Richmond City Council meeting on Feb. 20, Myrick introduced a plan for multiple follow-up actions. They include expanding the city's Industrial Safety Ordinance to include Sims and similar businesses and initiating a review of Sims' conditional use permit. The city, said Myrick, should consider using its policing and permitting authority to halt or further restrict operations at Sims if it fails to take appropriate precautions. He also suggested that the city manager send a letter to Sims demanding it implement safety measures similar to those outlined in Redwood City's 2013 letter to the company. Richmond should also receive a report on the cause of the fire and what specific steps Sims is taking to prevent future fires.

Myrick also said city staffers should be directed to maintain communication with the air district and state and federal regulatory agencies to ensure ongoing investigations are as "robust as possible."

Soto, who attended the community meeting, applauded the council's decision to move forward with most of the suggested actions and to review RFD's response to the fire. "In my opinion, the Sims response has been an exercise in damage control," he said.

The air district also announced that it had issued two notices of violation to Sims, including one public nuisance violation and one illegal open burning violation. But as of early this week, the district had not levied any fines against the company, and Sims' Richmond facility is open and operating as usual.

Gioia noted that determining the specific cause of the fire is necessary for the air district to levy fines. He also said that, despite industry resistance, the air district's fines should be substantially increased.

Karras reiterated that effective action must be taken now to prevent further toxic scrapyard fires. "We know it will happen again if it's business as usual," he said. □