

Flare sends billow of smoke above Chevron's Richmond refinery

Danielle Echeverria and Anna Kramer Aug. 14, 2020 Updated: Aug. 14, 2020 8:04 p.m.



Flaring at the Chevron oil refinery in Richmond on Friday sent a dark plume into the sky.

Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

A flaring incident occurred Friday at the Chevron refinery in Richmond, sending a plume of smoke into the air.

Flaring is a safety measure involving the release of chemicals enacted by a refinery when there is a problem.

“This morning at approximately 11:20 a.m., the Chevron Richmond Refinery experienced flaring activity due to an upset at a process unit,” the company

wrote on its Facebook page on Friday afternoon. “Our workforce quickly worked to resolve the issue and flaring is currently stopped. As we continue to make adjustments, intermittent flaring is possible.”

No shelter-in-place order was issued. John Gioia, a Contra Costa County supervisor, said a county hazmat team was on site with air quality officials. The source of the problem is unknown, he said.

The company said that a Community Warning System Level 1 was issued because of the visibility of the smoke. Level 1 is the lowest warning and requires no community action.

“There is an important distinction between a fire and a flare,” said Richmond Mayor Tom Butt, addressing widespread but incorrect reports that the refinery experienced a fire. “A fire is something that’s out of control and can really be dangerous. A flare is what happens when something in the plant goes haywire” and is a planned safety reaction. “It doesn’t look like there’s any lasting danger or impact on the city,” he added.

It is unclear what chemicals have been released.

Goia, who could see the smoke from his home, said the plume appeared to be staying high. (High plumes are generally better than low ones from a health perspective.) He also said the smoke appeared to be darker than usual, which would be linked to whatever the cause of the flaring was.