

CSB: Citgo Covered Up Hydrofluoric Acid Leak

JOHN McFARLAND, Associated Press Writer

DALLAS (AP) - Federal officials issued urgent new safety recommendations Wednesday for a Texas oil refinery where 21 tons of deadly acid were released this summer and said they are investigating the use of the chemical at refineries nationwide.

The head of the U.S. Chemical Safety Board said the inquiry continues into the July accident at Citgo's Corpus Christi refinery that seriously injured a worker, and accidents involving hydrofluoric acid in Illinois and Pennsylvania are also being investigated. In all, about a third of the nation's 150 refineries use hydrofluoric acid, or HF, in the process of making high-octane gas.

"We're looking industrywide at the HF use in refineries and the safety of HF at the 51 refineries," CSB investigations supervisor Robert Hall said.

The United Steel Workers union and the Sierra Club have been urging a ban on the acid for months, saying it's too dangerous to workers and people who live nearby. The highly corrosive acid can burn eyes, eat away flesh at a rapid rate and is fatal after prolonged exposure.

At the Corpus Christi plant, a control valve failed July 19 and released an HF vapor cloud. That cloud caught fire and started explosions that released the additional 21 tons of acid vapor, about 2 tons of which escaped into the sky. The injured worker got caught up in the cloud. Winds helped carry the massive cloud into the ship channel and away from people.

The CSB was critical of Citgo's lack of cooperation with investigators, its objection to the public release of surveillance video of the incident and its early reports to state regulators that only 30 pounds of HF escaped into the sky.

"We believe the original release was at least 100 times larger than Citgo had originally stated," said Hall.

Citgo, a Houston-based refiner and subsidiary of Venezuela's national oil company, said in a statement that it is cooperating and has already taken action on the recommendations.

"We hold nothing in higher regard than the safety of our employees and members of the local community," said the company, which said its HF calculations were based on air samples and that its reluctance to release the video was for security purposes.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has "significant concerns" about Citgo's reporting, spokeswoman Andrea Morrow said, and the agency's investigation

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is pending.

The CSB recommended that Citgo upgrade its emergency water system within 30 days. The system is used to spray down and absorb HF if it escapes, but the board's investigation found the refinery nearly ran out of water after the first day and had to start using salt water from the ship channel.

Officials also recommended third-party audits at Citgo's refineries in Corpus Christi and near Chicago. Refineries using HF are supposed to undergo safety audits every three years, but the CSB found neither Citgo refinery has ever had one.

The final CSB report on the Texas accident will be finished in August, but the board's Chairman John Bresland said the urgent recommendation was issued because of fear of "imminent hazard to workers or members of the community."

"In this case, we felt like we could not wait for the final report on our investigation," he said.

The CSB does not issue citations or fines. It makes safety recommendations to plants, industry organizations, labor groups, and regulatory agencies, and Bresland said typically those recommendations are followed.

Bresland said he's concerned by the three serious incidents this year involving HF. In March, about a dozen workers were treated for exposure after HF was released at a Sunoco oil refinery in South Philadelphia. A few months later, two workers were hurt when acid escaped from ExxonMobil Corp.'s refinery in Joliet, Ill.

The steelworkers union, which includes many refinery workers, and the Sierra club both said they were glad the recommendations included third-party audits. The union said it hopes the final report "addresses the overall safety of the refinery, similar to the BP Texas City report where the board told BP to examine the safety management systems in all its U.S. refineries."

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