Corrosion Linked to 2011 Chevron Refinery Fire

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Corrosion that went unchecked — the suspected cause of a fire at Chevron Corp.'s Richmond refinery in August — has been linked to a fire at the plant in October 2011, the San Francisco Chronicle reported (http://bit.ly/OzFQcu [1]).

According to state inspection documents obtained by The Chronicle, a state Division of Occupational Safety and Health inspector who investigated the smaller 2011 fire documented allegations from two workers of corrosion at the refinery.

The 2011 fire took place during a scheduled maintenance shutdown and was quickly extinguished.

"We're afraid something is going to fall through the cracks," one worker told Cal/OSHA safety inspector Carla Fritz, who went to the plant to investigate the fire last November.

"We're concerned about increased corrosion — we've increased temperatures and increased rates, and it takes a toll on the equipment," said the worker, who was identified in Fritz's notes as head operator of the lube oil plant — the most senior of a 20-member operator crew.

Cal/OSHA said in a statement that a violation notice was not issued to Chevron over the 2011 fire "because the problem alleged and potential hazard had been already identified and corrected."

The Chronicle obtained Fritz's notes under the state Public Records Act. State officials redacted the names of Chevron employees she interviewed.

A Chevron spokesman told the Associated Press that the 2011 fire was contained in a furnace in the lubricants plant, and that the company took appropriate actions afterward to protect the safety of its employees and facilities.

"We immediately responded, shut down the affected operations, evacuated all non-essential staff, and successfully contained the incident," Sean Comey said in a statement.

He added that workers at Chevron have the authority to stop any operation, without any repercussions, if they believe people or the environment are in danger.

Another fire struck the refinery on Aug. 6, creating a huge plume of black smoke and sending thousands of people to hospitals with health complaints.

Chevron later said it was stepping up inspections after it was determined that the

blaze was caused by a failure in a five-foot section of an old pipe.

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