
State regulators: No 'immediate health concerns' from Deer Park terminal fire

In a statement Monday afternoon, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality said air quality monitoring "had not detected any immediate health concerns at ground level" amid a multi-tank fire at a petrochemical storage facility near Houston.

BY KIAH COLLIER MARCH 18, 2019 5 PM

Smoke rises from a fire burning at the Intercontinental Terminals Company in Deer Park, east of Houston. Jaimie Meldrum/Handout via REUTERS

A massive plume of black smoke continued to waft over the Houston area Monday after a fire broke out at a petrochemical storage facility over the weekend in Deer Park. Residents and workers also began complaining about respiratory problems including itchy throats and burning eyes.

But the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality — the state's environmental regulatory agency — said in a statement Monday afternoon that there is no need to be concerned about health impacts.

"As of 11:30 a.m. Monday, TCEQ had not detected any immediate health concerns at ground level," the statement said.

Local officials conveyed the same message, saying the plume was still too high in the air to impact people on the ground.

They also said the fire is expected to burn for two more days, but a shelter-in-place order for Deer Park was lifted Monday after agencies announced the air was safe to breath and no injuries have been reported at the compound, where 270 people work.

Rafael Perez, who works at a manufacturing facility just a few miles away, told The Texas Tribune that his throat started itching and burning at about 11 a.m. Monday.
"My co-workers had a rough cough or irritation in their throats," he said.

The TCEQ has faced intense scrutiny over lax air monitoring efforts since Hurricane Harvey — most recently over a joint decision with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to stop NASA from flying a pollution-monitoring plane over the hurricane zone in the weeks after the storm.

But the agency's statement Monday described an expansive air-monitoring operation after the fire broke out at the Intercontinental Terminals Company's Deer Park facility Sunday morning and spread to several tanks that hold chemicals used in gasoline, including naphtha and xylene.

The 265-acre property, which is on the Houston Ship Channel, houses 242 storage tanks, according to the company's website.

TCEQ said its environmental investigators conducted hand-held air monitoring in the vicinity overnight Sunday and that it deployed two additional air-monitoring stations that "are being strategically located in coordination with the unified command for the incident." The agency said it will continue conducting hand-held monitoring and collecting data from stationary air monitors in the area.

"TCEQ also worked to arrange EPA's ASPECT airplane to provide air monitoring flights over the area," the agency added. The name is an acronym for Airborne Spectral Photometric Environmental Collection Technology.

But environmental groups complained Monday that neither the TCEQ nor the company had released enough data to back up claims that there's no immediate risk to human health.

"They're asking us to trust their professional judgment, and they're giving us zero reason to believe that's true," said Elena Craft, a senior health scientist with the Environmental Defense Fund.

Craft said TCEQ has a history of lax enforcement during similar incidents. A 2017 Texas Tribune investigation found that thousands of rogue air pollution events — some far more dangerous than others — occur at industrial facilities in Texas every year but that only a handful of them garner fines.

"They should be held accountable for these kinds of incidents," Craft said. "There is little to no enforcement of these facilities."

The TCEQ posted some air-quality monitoring data on its website Monday, but Craft noted it was not up to date. A defense fund spokesman also noted that the TCEQ's stationary monitor in Deer Park hadn't been working.

Francisco Sanchez, a spokesman for Harris County's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, said on Twitter that the office had asked Intercontinental Terminals to publicly release its own measurements "for transparency." Local media reports Monday afternoon said the company indicated it would comply with that request.

The company did not immediately respond to requests for comment from the Tribune but tweeted Sunday, "The safety of our employees, our surrounding community and the environment is our first priority."

Despite claims of lax enforcement, TCEQ's annual enforcement reports and online databases show the agency has fined the 47-year-old company at least 10 times since 2002 — and at least twice last year — for various pollution incidents.

The company also has been in "significant" noncompliance with the federal Clean Water Act for nine of the last 12 quarters, according to an EPA enforcement database.

That includes an incident last year in which the company released more than 10 times the allowable limit of cyanide into the San Jacinto River basin from April through June.

Disclosure: The Environmental Defense Fund has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.
“Textbook” Gaussian plume! Looks like nearly adiabatic conditions and a coning plume.

Another “textbook” Gaussian plume showing the plume in a somewhat more unstable atmosphere and the leveling off of the plume downwind as buoyancy lessens. This picture also shows some of the particulate matter falling toward the ground.
Unstable atmosphere, lots of mixing and billowing smoke. Buoyancy lifts the plume to higher elevations. Some evidence of falling particulate matter on the far left of the picture.

Temperature inversion and probably a ground-based temperature inversion, trapping the plume, top and bottom.
Very slow wind speed, enabling the buoyant plume to rise nearly straight up, high and out of the way.

Unstable atmospheric conditions, but particulate matter clearly seen falling to the ground. Although there is not a temperature inversion in this atmosphere, the particulate matter fumigates people on the ground downwind.