~~What caused Chevron pipeline to leak diesel into bay?~~

~~Noah Baustin and Injeong Kim on March 3, 2021~~

~~It could take as long as six months before people in Richmond know what caused a Chevron pipeline to leak hundreds of gallons of a diesel product into San Francisco Bay in February.~~

~~An independent firm will investigate what caused a quarter-inch hole to open in the line, allowing 500 to 750 gallons of a diesel-water mixture to pollute the bay, Randy Sawyer, deputy director of Contra Costa County Health Services, told Richmond City Council. He said the work will be overseen by a committee of city and county workers as well as community members, and that the findings will be presented in a public meeting.~~

~~Chevron also is investigating, spokesperson Linsi Crain told the council. “We will learn from this incident and continue to focus on being a good neighbor,” she said.~~

~~The spill reignited a push by many community members and environmentalists to close the refinery, which is Richmond’s largest employer and taxpayer, and benefactor to a number of area nonprofits. It also sparked a lawsuit from commercial fishers who say Chevron’s practices contaminate the bay, threatening their livelihood.~~

~~Response timeline~~

~~The leak came to light when a citizen called the refinery around 2:36 p.m. on Feb. 9 to report a sheen on the water near the Chevron Richmond Long Wharf, according to Chevron’s report to Contra Costa Health Services. Chevron firefighters and wharf operators responded, and it was quickly determined that an overhead line was leaking, the report said. The line was shut down and a boom was set to capture the spilled diesel.~~

~~At 3:20 p.m., which was more than 40 minutes after the spill was first observed, Chevron contacted the National Response Center and five minutes later, the California State Warning Center at the Office of Emergency Services. State regulations say spills of hazardous materials must be reported to the OES “immediately.”~~

~~According to a state report on the incident, when Chevron called in the spill, the pipeline was still leaking, at about five gallons a minute, and was not yet contained.~~

~~By 4:30 p.m., the Chevron report says, the line was no longer leaking.~~

~~At a Richmond City Council meeting a week after the spill, council member Claudia Jiménez asked Crain why the company let 40 minutes pass before notifying authorities.~~

~~“I think that will be part of the investigation,” Crain said.~~

~~“There are a lot of items to do for all the people involved in order to respond to something like this. And so there’s a lot happening during that time frame, and there’s a particular order it needs to happen in.”~~

~~At the council meeting, Ben Eichenberg, an attorney with the San Francisco Baykeeper, said Chevron should have detected the spill when it happened.~~

~~“Just because this was a small spill, doesn’t mean this was a good response,” he said.~~

~~A unified command formed to address the spill, comprising Chevron, the county, the U.S. Coast Guard and the state Department of Fish and Wildlife Office of Spill Prevention and Response. Its Feb. 10 report showed that the sheen travelled south along the coast to Cypress Point and north to Point Molate.~~

Eric Laughlin, a public information officer with Fish and Wildlife, explained that diesel is a relatively light petroleum product, much lighter than crude oil. The absorbent booms that were deployed recovered some of the sheen on the water, “but Mother Nature did more to dissipate what was spilled,” he said. “The sun hits the sheen on the water and it breaks down the hydrocarbons, so it basically evaporates and dissipates.”

According to Laughlin, Feb. 12 was the last day the unified command observed the sheen on open water. But rainbow sheen was visible throughout the week of Feb. 15 in standing pools at Saltwater Station, a private beach southeast of the Long Wharf. That was the only place where the shoreline seemed to be affected, prompting a clean-up team to remove contaminated vegetation.

On Feb. 23, after four days without seeing any sheen, the unified command concluded its on-the-ground response to the spill.

Fishers file lawsuit

Two environmentally sensitive sites are close to where the spill took place. Laughlin explained that Brooks Island is a nesting site for herons and egrets and the nearby eelgrass beds serve as a nursery for dungeness crab and young fish. Protective booms were deployed at both sites as a precaution, but Laughlin said neither site was threatened by the spill. The state is still awaiting test results on samples of water, sediment, and mussels, but Laughlin predicted the impacts to wildlife and the environment would be “negligible.”

John Mellor, a commercial fisher and vice president of the San Francisco Herring Association, is concerned that the spill could have long-term impact on the herring fishery in the bay, which has been threatened by pollution for years. Mellor is a plaintiff in a lawsuit filed against Chevron last month in Contra Costa County. The plaintiffs, which include the association and individual fishers, have asked that the suit be classified as a class action on behalf of more than 100 commercial bay fishers.

About three weeks before the spill, fishers saw herring spawning near the Richmond Long Wharf, Mellor said. That would mean young fish would have been hatching around the time of the leak. Mellor is concerned that the pollution could damage juvenile herring this year, and discourage herring from spawning in the area in future seasons.

“Richmond is a really important spawning area for herring,” Mellor said.

While the Chevron spill was contained quickly and the product was relatively light, “diesel is still a petroleum product,” Mellor noted. “It’s still toxic.”

‘What is the limit?’

The refinery has been a source of concern for people in the Bay Area for more than a century, and a number of community groups keep tabs on it. One is the Richmond Our Power Coalition, which hosted a news conference on Feb. 23 calling on Chevron to sever its ties with Richmond. Several speakers called for the eventual shutdown of the refinery, which they said has done more harm than good for the community.

“I have many family members and friends who have illnesses such as asthma caused by Chevron’s pollution,” said Miguel Diaz, a Richmond High School student. “What is the limit? Where do we draw the line and say enough is enough? When do we move past Chevron?”

Another student, 16 year-old Lizbeth Ibarra, stressed that future generations are the ones who will be dealing with the consequences of any accidents at the refinery. “We don’t need Chevron,” she said. “We need to cut all ties and ensure that Richmond no longer feels like it’s depending on this toxic relationship with their refinery.”

Standard Oil opened the refinery in 1902. Today, under Chevron, it employs about 1,200 people. But Richmond has co-existed uneasily with Chevron. Spills and flaring events that belch toxic fumes have been a recurring source of air, water and soil pollution. And in 2012, a refinery fire sent smoke billowing across the bay, forcing thousands of people to seek treatment for breathing issues. That led to a protracted legal fight that ended in 2018 when Chevron settled with the city for $5 million, a sum many in Richmond considered low for the damage done.

In December, Chevron agreed to pay the Bay Area Air Quality Management District $147,000 to cover 29 air quality violations that took place at the refinery during 2016 – 2018.

Editor Christine Schiavo contributed to this report.