

Massive Houston chemical fire burns indefinitely, spreading smoke across Texas

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Officials from the state of Texas and Intercontinental Terminals Co. (ITC) have been monitoring a massive Houston-area chemical fire around the clock since the weekend. Due to the nature of the blaze, firefighters have to let the fire burn itself out but are unsure of when the chemicals will stop burning.

The fire has been raging since Sunday around 10:30 a.m. It began when a tank containing component chemicals for gasoline caught fire at ITC's petrochemical storage facility in Deer Park, Texas. The fire has since spread to at least six other tanks as firefighters work with foam and water to try to keep the flames from spreading further.

Harris County Fire Marshal Laurie Christensen told reporters there is not an estimate for when the fire will stop burning. Officials had initially stated that the fire would burn out by Wednesday.

"Fuel has burned off," Christensen told a press conference Tuesday morning. "That may be what has to happen. What I can't tell you is how long that will take."

A massive black plume of smoke has billowed from the site and spread over the city of Houston, and continues to move in a north-northwestern direction. The huge column of smoke was visible virtually everywhere in the Houston area on Monday. At the time of this writing, the edge of the smoke plume has reached Austin, approximately 162 miles away.

The fire is located in a section of the facility that contains 15 tanks, and the number of tanks on fire has varied throughout the incident. At a news conference on Tuesday, an ITC spokesperson stated eight tanks were on fire but soon after issued a news release saying seven tanks were ablaze.

Most of the chemicals in the fire are used to produce gasoline, and exposure at 100 ppm can cause

unpleasant side effects. Two of the tanks burning contain a gasoline blend, one tank contains naphtha, another xylene, and one has pyrolysis gasoline. Naphtha can cause irritation to the eyes and the respiratory system, it affects the central nervous system and is harmful and even fatal if it is swallowed. Xylene causes skin irritation and may also be fatal if it is swallowed or enters the airway.

State regulators have said the plume of smoke poses no immediate health risks. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), the state's environmental regulatory agency, said in a statement Monday afternoon that there is no need to be concerned about health impacts. According to officials, favorable weather has lifted the smoke well about ground level, around 6,000 feet, posing little threat to residents in the area.

Dry and clear conditions are helping the particles of the chemicals dissipate above the ground, according to earlier reports in the *Houston Chronicle*. Additionally, warmer afternoon temperatures are causing the plume to stay above 1,000 feet, where people would be at serious risk for smoke or soot inhalation, according to National Weather Service meteorologists.

However, environmental groups have said that neither the TCEQ nor ITC have 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," Elena Craft, a senior health scientist with the Environmental Defense Fund, told the *Bryan-College Station Eagle*.

Craft told reporters that the TCEQ has a history of lax enforcement concerning pollution events. A 2017 *Texas Tribune* investigation found that thousands of rogue air

pollution events occur at industrial facilities in Texas every year but that only a handful of them garner fines.

“By looking behind me, you can tell this is not normal, this is not fine,” Corey Williams, policy and research director for Air Alliance Houston, told local ABC 13. “The only thing preventing this from being a major catastrophe is favorable weather conditions.”

Williams added that there may be delayed health effects, as black particles could be seen settling in parts of the city.

Locals have also cast doubt on official reports of the health risks. Jorge Guerra, who lives three miles away from the fire, told CBS News he doesn’t believe the air quality is safe.

“I’ve seen ash fall out—black pieces of ash,” Guerra said. “I’ve seen it on my cars, I’ve seen it on the front porch on the sidewalk. Does that scare you? It does, it does. What scares me more is what we don’t see.”

Experts say even if the air quality is good now, any sudden change in weather could quickly reverse the situation.

“If we get a thunderstorm or something like that, which mixes the atmosphere, then all that junk is going to come to the surface,” Robert Talbot, a professor of atmospheric chemistry at the University of Houston, told CBS News.

Classes resumed at La Porte and Deer Park ISD after the districts initially closed schools on Monday. But there was mixed reaction from parents, especially since 19 different schools are within a five-mile radius of the incident and the black smoke is still visible. Parents expressed dissatisfaction on Facebook.

“Kids at San Jacinto Elementary will be able to see the fire out of their school window. You’re putting our kids at risk for what reason? My kids will not be in school until the fire is out,” one parent wrote.

Another parent said, “My kid will not be in class until the fire is out. My son’s school is a couple of miles away. I will not gamble with his life.”

ITC has a history of environmental violations, having paid more than \$200,000 in fines over the past decade. The TCEQ’s databases show the agency has fined the company at least 10 times since 2002, and at least twice last year, for various pollution-related incidents.

The company also has been in “significant” noncompliance with the federal Clean Water Act for 9 of the last 12 quarters, according to an EPA

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



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