

Houston chemical fire: Residents ordered to “shelter-in-place” due to benzene danger

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Thousands of residents of two suburbs of Houston, Texas, were told to “shelter-in-place” Thursday morning after elevated levels of benzene, a colorless, cancer-causing, flammable liquid used in the manufacture of gasoline, were detected in the area. Air quality monitoring stations reported dangerous levels of the chemical in the atmosphere, prompting local officials to close schools as well.

According to the statement, one-hour levels of benzene in Deer Park “were measured at a maximum of 190.68 parts per billion at 4 a.m., dropping to 48.03 ppb at 5 a.m., and 8.12 ppb at 6 a.m.” Any short-term exposure above 180 ppb is considered hazardous.

The regulatory agency also reported elevated levels of benzene, measuring 165.17 ppb, at the Lynchburg Ferry monitoring station on Wednesday at 9 p.m.

This is the third time residents of Deer Park have been ordered to stay inside due to dangerous air quality levels since the fire at the Intercontinental Terminals Company (ITC) chemical storage plant began early Sunday morning. As of this writing a shelter-in-place order remains in effect for Galena Park, which is located approximately 12 miles east of Houston. The shelter-in-place order was lifted for Deer Park Thursday afternoon after seven hours.

The massive chemical fire at the ITC plant in Deer Park was declared extinguished by firefighters Wednesday after it raged for over three days. However the danger isn’t over for thousands of residents located near the sprawling 2,300-acre facility.

Of the 15 storage tanks located at the ITC facility, 11 have suffered severe fire damage. Firefighters have been dousing the smoldering petrochemical tanks with firefighting foam in an attempt to prevent dangerous chemical vapors from escaping or potential flare-ups from reemerging. Besides gasoline components, several

storage tanks contained chemicals used in nail polish remover, glues and paint thinner.

It is still unknown at this time what was the catalyst for starting the inferno, however local officials promised a “thorough investigation” in an attempt to quell rising public anger.

A Texas National Guard Unit, the 6th Civil Support Team, has been activated in response to the chemical leaks detected at the facility. Civil Support Teams are typically made of Army and Air National Guard troops with civilian contractors as well. Each team is equipped with highly sensitive monitoring equipment used in the detection of nuclear, radiological, chemical or biological compounds. In many cases these teams are deployed undercover to monitor large sporting events or concerts that are considered “soft-targets” for a “dirty bomb” radiological attack.

The deployment of a Civil Support Team at the ITC facility could signal that local officials are unable to locate the precise location(s) of the chemical or vapor leaks. The CST’s equipment could also be used to test air quality and precisely assess what has leaked into the atmosphere over the past week. It is also a testament to the danger posed to local residents. Prolonged exposure to any of the various chemicals stored at ITC is comparable in severity to a chemical weapon attack.

People living near the facility have exhibited signs of severe chemical exposure. Serious symptoms reported by residents include headaches, nausea and nosebleeds. Long-term exposure to highly flammable chemicals can have an immediate and long-lasting effect on the human body, seeping into the bloodstream and deep into the bone marrow. Young children, the elderly and pregnant are especially susceptible to exposure.

A 2015 study conducted by the Department of State Health Services found that residents living in eastern

Harris County and east Houston have higher than expected levels of certain cancers compared to the general population. In the entire study area, which includes towns such as Deer Park, more cases than expected of childhood lymphoma and melanoma, and an increase at all ages for brain and cervical cancer was established.

Local residents and environmental groups have been highly skeptical of the TCEQ, the state's environmental regulatory agency that has been in charge of disseminating air quality information to residents. Local reporters questioned officials as to why an air quality monitoring site near the plant was down for seven hours Monday morning. TCEQ released a statement assuring residents this was a routine "quality control" check that is required following a repair.

The prevailing attitude of workers toward the TCEQ and the petrochemical companies is comprised of doubtful reservations and seething anger. Sentiments such as those expressed by Deer Park mother Kristin Crump in an interview with CBS News are common, "I do not fully trust what they say," she said. "I do believe what is in the air is very harmful and it can have long-term effects such as cancer and things like that later down the line. I don't think it's worth risking that for me or my kids to stay there and breath in this stuff."

Besides unbreathable air, east Texas residents may have to contend with contaminated water. While conditions have remained dry, a thunderstorm could cause a runoff of chemicals into the Houston Ship Channel which empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Even the firefighting foam used to contain the vapors contains hydrocarbons that are known to cause cancer.

The TCEQ has been slow to respond to air quality concerns in the past, notably during Hurricane Harvey in 2017. The TCEQ was unable to keep track of millions of pounds of excess pollution released into the air by oil refineries and chemical plants that were experiencing failures and restarts during the powerful hurricane. The TCEQ hasn't taken any regulatory or enforcement action against any of the companies responsible for leaking chemicals, including benzene, into the air and waterways following the storm.

According to the *Houston Chronicle*, the agency has penalized the local petrochemical industry for "less than 3 percent of rogue releases of harmful air pollutants since 2011."

These "rogue releases" are shockingly common in the greater Houston area. As the *Chronicle* reported in 2016, southeast Texas has a chemical fire or explosion every six weeks on average. The TCEQ and Environmental Protection Agency have acted as appendages of the petrochemical industry, conducting public relations on behalf of the economic interests that dominate political and social life in the region.

The agencies charged with protecting public health routinely turn a blind eye to safety violations while offering false assurances to workers and residents who have to live with the after effects of deadly fires and chemical leaks. Meanwhile the companies themselves do everything to extract profits out of the environment, regardless of sustainability or safety.



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