Ford Flat Rock Assembly Plant closes down after gas from facility leaks into sewer system

Muhammad Khan
8 September 2021

Ford's Flat Rock Assembly plant south of Detroit has been closed through Friday in response to the leaking of 1,000-3,000 gallons of benzene into the local sewer system. A state of emergency was declared last Thursday for the city of Flat Rock, as well as for Wayne and Monroe counties. Voluntary evacuations are being urged for residents in more than 1,100 homes in the surrounding area.

The leak recalls the public health disaster in Flint, Michigan, after the city's 100,000 residents were exposed to lead-contaminated water when city officials switched the municipal water supply to the Flint River. The Flint River has been heavily contaminated by decades of industrial activity by General Motors and other auto companies.

The leak also compounds the public health disaster in Michigan from the coronavirus pandemic, where it has officially claimed 21,000 lives. Wayne County, which includes Flat Rock as well as Detroit, has recorded over 5,000 deaths, the highest number of any county in the state.

The leak was first indicated by residents who reported smelling fumes in the community as early as Tuesday, August 31. Ongoing investigations by EGLE (The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy) and other state and federal agencies have determined that the gas has spread through four square miles of the sewers.

Benzene is a chemical that is a colorless or light yellow liquid at room temperature. It has a sweet odor and is highly flammable. According to the CDC, inhaling high levels of benzene can lead to drowsiness, dizziness, rapid or irregular heartbeat, headaches, tremors, confusion, and unconsciousness. At the highest levels of exposure death can occur.

Long-term exposure to benzene causes harmful effects on the bone marrow and can cause a decrease in red blood cells, leading to anemia. It can also cause excessive bleeding and can affect the immune system, increasing the chance of an infection. Women who breathed high levels of benzene for many months have been found to have irregular menstrual periods and a decrease in the size of their ovaries.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has also determined that benzene causes cancer in humans. Long-term exposure to high levels of benzene in the air can cause leukemia, which is cancer of the blood-forming organs.

Potential exposure areas in the city have been split up into two zones. In zone 1 residents have been encouraged to evacuate. Zone 2 remains under investigation for exposure. Residents living between the two zones have expressed frustration at the confusing division of the two areas, which are not physically connected and leave a gap which covers a residential area and the site of two public schools.

“Our concern is, how do you do a cutoff?” said Flat Rock resident Amy Gomez to the Detroit Free Press. “We’re literally like six houses away (from the cutoff). Every day the zone keeps expanding. So are we going to be asked to evacuate in a couple days?”

The source of the leak was traced to the local Ford Flat Rock Assembly Plant, which produces Mustangs. A statement released by Bob Holycross, vice president of sustainability, environment and safety engineering for Ford, admitted that Ford “discovered what originally looked to be a relatively small leak in a pipe that carries gasoline used to fuel vehicles built at the plant. We shut down the fuel pipe, called in experts to remove gas from a containment tank and the primary storage tank, and notified officials of what we found. We believed then that the leak was contained to our

© World Socialist Web Site

property… Today [September 3], we determined that the scale of the fuel leak was much larger, and that Ford is the likely source of the problem in Flat Rock."

The Flat Rock plant had been closed for the Labor Day weekend and Ford is keeping production shut down at the plant until the end of the week.

Flat Rock Assembly Plant workers, many of whom live in the nearby area, as well as many other residents, have had to evacuate their homes. Authorities have stated that it could take weeks for response teams to determine how widespread the exposure is and when it will be safe for residents to return home.

"We urge Michiganders in the affected areas to take swift action and evacuate their homes," said Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, chief medical executive and chief deputy for health at MDHHS, in a news release. "You may not be able to see or smell the vapors that could put your health at risk, and we recommend everyone in the affected area consider relocating until further notice and we can confirm it is safe to return to your homes."

Dr. Khaldun added that "there's also no known specific treatment for benzene exposure and, really, the best thing is to remove someone from the exposure risk." Responding to questions from city residents Dr. Khaldun stated that if it were her, she would evacuate.

Contradicting the urgent note from Dr. Khaldun, Elizabeth Hertel, state health and human services department director, stated on Sunday, "We don't believe there is any imminent danger to residents at this time, however we are acting out of an abundance of caution."

Adding further confusion, Kory Groetsch, who is the environmental public health director for the department of health and human services, has said it is a "voluntary, recommended evacuation."

"I can bring half the knowledge, which is the science, but the other half is how people feel about it in the community, how you process risk," Groetsch said.

"I just want to know whether we should evacuate," Darrell Gore, a Flat Rock resident, told the Detroit *Free Press*. "We're in Zone 1, we're in the hotbed. I have two young children. I want to do what's safe for myself and my family. If it's voluntary, what would they do in this situation? I mean, I'm not really getting clear answers on whether or not we should stay or go."

Students at River Heights Academy Charter School, which is located in the center of the affected area, will be attending the opening of classes at the Wayne County Community College Downriver Campus, which is located approximately 10 miles to the north of the affected area in Flat Rock. River Heights Academy Charter School plans to begin classes as scheduled on Tuesday, September 7.

However, there are five other schools in the nearby Flat Rock school district. Four of these schools opened for in-person education on Tuesday. This is despite the fact that all four of the schools are less than a mile from either zones 1 or 2. District officials claimed on Sunday that all of the school buildings were tested and did not show any signs of exposure to the gas leak.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site