Decade-high flaring at Richmond Chevron refinery
Nine flaring episodes occurred last year, mostly because of issues with the refinery’s new hydrogen plant

“The Chevron refinery is photographed in Richmond, Calif., on Tuesday, July 11, 2017. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

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RICHMOND — The Chevron petroleum refinery in Richmond had nine flaring episodes in 2018 — the most to occur in one year in more than a decade, according to a recent Bay Area Air Quality Management District report.

“We’re disappointed in this increased flaring activity by Chevron, and want them to resolve this issue as quickly as possible so there’s no further flaring and this doesn’t happen again,” Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, who sits on the Bay Area Air Quality Management District board, said in an interview.
The report, presented at a Bay Area Air Quality Management District committee meeting Monday, laid out the number of flaring episodes per year at Bay Area refineries from 2005 to 2018. In 2005, the district prohibited non-emergency refinery flares and required the Bay Area’s five petroleum refineries to take on “flare minimization plans.”

Before the restriction, non-emergency flaring was common at Bay Area refineries, according to a 2004 report from the environmental group Communities For A Better Environment.

Flares are “important safety devices” that burn refinery process gases that would otherwise be directly released to the atmosphere, according to an air district news release issued after a flaring episode March 13. Flaring incidents also occurred in January and February of this year. The year following the new rules, 2006, Chevron’s refinery had 21 flares. Each year since, the refinery has had fewer than seven flares in a year. In 2013 it had zero; in 2017, it had four.

“Chevron had been doing well through 2017; I think that has to be put in perspective,” Gioia said.

![Frequency of Flaring Events](image)

Courtesy of Bay Area Air Quality Management District

Chevron has blamed the recent flaring episodes on “startup activities at a processing unit,” officials said in a statement to the Bay Area News Group on Tuesday. Chevron installed a new hydrogen processing unit last year after getting approval from the Richmond City Council, Gioia said.
Although the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's investigation of the flaring incidents is still underway, Gioia said it's clear that “there are some issues related to the hydrogen plant” and how it is reacting with the rest of the refinery. Chevron will need to make some “modifications and adjustments” to get the new equipment and old equipment to interact right.

“The flaring does not pose any environmental or health risk to the community,” Chevron officials said in the statement. “We want to assure our neighbors that flares are highly regulated safety devices, designed to relieve pressure during the refining processes and help keep our equipment and plants operating safely.”

Though the burning of hydrogen doesn’t pose a health risk, Gioia said, last week’s power outage that led to the flare also resulted in a release of sulfur dioxide vapor– which does impact health. California Office of Emergency Services data revealed that a sulfur dioxide spill also occurred on Sunday. In both spill reports, the amount of sulfur dioxide emitted was unknown.

“The concern is we hold all refineries to a high standard, and this is failing to meet the high standard,” Gioia said, adding that the air district also needs to be “more proactive to communicate these issues to the public.”

Some additional flaring over the next few months is expected as Chevron works to fix the issues, Gioia said.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt said in an interview that he would like to see more transparency from both Chevron and the air district.

“People get freaked out about it, and the answers they are getting are becoming less and less credible,” Butt said in an email.