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Exxon Faces Lawsuit Over Air Pollution from Petrochemical Fire

By Erwin Seba | August 1, 2019

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HOUSTON — Exxon Mobil Corp was hit with a lawsuit on Thursday over pollution from a fire at the company's Baytown C

The fire was being investigated by federal and state agencies. The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Texas Cc raised a column of black smoke over the area.

The suit by Harris County, which includes Baytown, is the second lawsuit against the company involving fires at the plant this year.



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The suit seeks court orders to prevent future fires at Exxon's giant Baytown refining and petrochemical complex, said Rock Owens, managing attc

"It's disappointing to me for a company to have these kinds of problems with the potential for some kind of disaster," he said.

Exxon did not reply to a request for comment on the lawsuit. In a statement on Thursday, spokesman Sarah Nordin said the fire has been extinguished. Because of the fire, production at Exxon's 560,500 barrel-per-day (bpd) Baytown refinery remains cut back, the company confirmed. It did not say how much. Exxon said earlier that 66 workers had been examined at a clinic for possible injuries, though not all had required treatment. Of those, 37 were treated. Officials ordered Baytown residents to remain indoors with their air conditioning turned off for about four hours after an explosion set off the fire.

Harris County officials are asking a state court to order an investigation to determine the root cause of the fire in a propylene recovery unit, and to order the unit shut down. Harris County is seeking similar orders in connection with a lawsuit filed in March over a hydrotreater fire in the Baytown refinery, he said.

Exxon Mobil Corp.'s suburban Houston refining and chemicals complex erupted in flames on Wednesday, prompting municipal leaders to order residents to evacuate. Orange flames and thick, black smoke began pouring from an olefins unit in the plant around 11 a.m. Central time in the city of Baytown, Texas. A curfew order was lifted after about four hours because no toxic fumes were detected.

The fire has the potential to cripple Exxon's U.S. chemical business, 45% of which is concentrated at the Baytown complex, according to Wood Mackenzie. Intertwined, the incident also has the potential to disrupt fuel production at the facility.

"The duration and magnitude of the market impact will be determined by the extent of the damage and what units and chemical value chains are affected," he said.

The incident comes four months after a fire at chemical storage complex in the nearby suburb of Deer Park blackened the skies for four days and sent chemicals into the Houston Ship Channel, shutting one of North America's most important industrial thoroughfares for days.

"Today's chemical explosion at the Exxon Mobil plant in Baytown is just the latest in an endless list of hazardous incidents that Houston-area communities are asking the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the EPA to get serious about preventing these dangerous fires."

Exxon's Baytown facility is 24 miles (39 kilometers) from downtown Houston, on the eastern bank of a heavily trafficked waterway that connects the Gulf of Mexico to the city. The complex, which covers an area four times the size of New York's Central Park, caught fire on March 16 and again on June 6. The olefins unit

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