



Brianne Zorn, Mayor

January 29, 2026

Sent by email only

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors

Chair Supervisor Candace Andersen

Supervisor John Gioia

Supervisor Diane Burgis

Supervisor Ken Carlson

Supervisor Shanelle Scales-Preston

Dear Contra Costa County Supervisors,

This Sunday will be the one-year anniversary of the fire at the PBF Energy Martinez Refining Company (MRC). As an elected leader of the Martinez community, I have voiced my support for the Contra Costa County (County) departments and regulatory agencies who protect the health and safety of the Martinez community, both residents and non-residents alike. However, the recent flaring incident at MRC has exposed gaps in the efficacy of incident communications. I ask you to consider the ongoing health impacts to my community and take administrative actions to improve the incident communication process.

Background

At the time of the spent catalyst release in November 2022, direct public communication was limited to Level 3 Shelter-in-Place/Evacuation warnings. The Martinez Alerts system was initiated in July 2023 because the Community Warning System (CWS) did not meet the communication needs of the community. Since that time, CWS has made significant improvements. Today, Level 2 incidents are communicated directly to the public, and the public can opt-in to receive alerts on Level 1 flaring. A Civil Grand Jury report was published in May 2024 discussing the inadequacies of the CWS.

Major Refinery Fire on February 1, 2025

A Level 2 fire was reported by MRC to CWS at 1:49 pm on February 1, 2025. Both CWS and Martinez Alerts issued texts, emails, and social media posts quickly and efficiently. In addition to ConFire and refinery fire first responders, County Health (CCH) emergency response teams mobilized to the scene. The community watched the news and monitored social media posts to get information. The incident was not elevated by

CCH to a Level 3 until 5 pm. At that time, CWS Level 3 alerts, Martinez Alerts, WEA (cell towers), Reverse 911 (land lines), and sirens were activated.

Communication issues with this event:

1. The fire was reported as a Level 2 incident by the refinery. CCH did not elevate this uncontrolled incident to a Level 3 until air conditions changed. Understandably, the community was frustrated the sirens didn't go off sooner. The CWS communication of only a Level 2 incident conflicted with the community's experiences. The community watched the refinery burn for three hours, prompting some people to evacuate, regardless of CWS communications.
2. Some community members reported not receiving any notification at all, likely because they hadn't opted in "correctly" and/or they weren't in the WEA area.
3. MRC did not communicate the chemicals in the fire in the 72-hour report. This was not disclosed to the public until ten days later on Tuesday, February 11 with a press release outlining the potential impacts from these chemicals.

Flaring Incident on January 26, 2026

A Level 1 flaring was reported by MRC to CWS and an alert was issued at 10:53 am on January 26, 2026. In response to numerous complaints of strong odors from the public (in Martinez and Benicia) and outreach from Martinez leadership, CCH staff mobilized to conduct air monitoring. While the community waited for information, many people had to leave their locations due to odor, including students at Alhambra High School who were evacuated due to initial concerns about a gas leak, and City of Martinez staff at the water plant who evacuated the offices adjacent to the refinery fence line due to odors.

The City of Martinez re-posts information that is approved by the County public information officer (PIO). No social media was posted by CCH for this event because it was a Level 1 incident. In the absence of official statements from CCH, the City of Martinez coordinated directly with the PIO to get information to distribute to our community as we awaited guidance from CCH. A statement was ultimately released on the CCH website stating that results of the air monitoring indicated there were no detections requiring action from the community due to public health risks.

Communication issues with this event:

1. The refinery reported this as a Level 1 flaring event, not a chemical release, so real-time community recommendations were not issued.
 2. Although there were clear offsite impacts to members of the public, this event was not elevated to a Level 2. Therefore, the communication process that is in place for Level 2 incidents was not activated and the community remained uninformed.
 3. The release appeared to be short lived, so air monitoring conducted by CCH resulted in no detections requiring action. This conflicted with the community's
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experiences. The odors were significant enough to change the behavior and actions of the community.

4. The fenceline monitoring from both MRC and the Bay Area Air District (Air District) showed spikes of H₂S at the time of the initial report, but this information was not included in any communication to the public. There is no third-party community air monitoring station where the fenceline communities can compare and contrast refinery fenceline monitoring data.
5. The Martinez community read social media posts later that afternoon posted by contractors at MRC who reported “being evacuated” from the refinery, further eroding trust in the CCH conclusion.
6. The CWS alert was issued at 10:53 am. The City of Martinez maintained social media posts at 11:25 am, 12:37 pm, and 4:21 pm. The Air District issued an alert at 2:48 pm. CCH released the public statement at 4:21 pm, and posted on social media at 5:04 pm.

Considerations and Recommendations

Despite the many improvements the County has made to CWS over the past few years, the flaring and odors on January 26 has reinforced my concern about weaknesses in the communication process. I encourage you to consider some of the following changes and improvements:

1. Determination of CWS Level. CCH should evaluate reports from the refinery more critically. If a flaring is accompanied by potential offsite impacts such as odor, CCH should elevate the incident to a Level 2 prompting communications. If an uncontrolled event such as a fire is reported that is visible by neighboring communities, CWS should issue a Level 3 shelter-in-place alert immediately until the incident is under control.
 2. Rebuilding Public Trust. Communications from CCH and CWS with “no action required” statements that are in direct conflict with the community’s experiences during an incident erode trust in the scientists and leaders who are responsible for protecting their health and safety. The community has very little trust in the data from the real-time fenceline monitors at the refinery without a third-party community air monitor to corroborate or dispute findings.
 3. CWS Opt-ins and Community Reach. Level 1 and Level 2 alerts require opting into the system. At the time of the February 2025 fire, there were 3,500 opt-ins for Martinez Alerts and only 7,000 opt-ins for CWS by Martinez residents. The official population of Martinez is approximately 36,000 people. The County should consider enabling WEA alerts when there are necessary communications to everyone, not just those who have opted in.
 4. Identification of Potential Community Impacts. CCH should update the Hazardous Materials Incident Notification Policy (adopted January 2025) to require chemicals associated with the CWS notification to be reported the day of
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the incident. This information can be found on Safety Data Sheets that are required to always be with workers or from fence line monitoring data.

5. Communicating Information. CCH staff and the PIO should be authorized to provide real-time recommendations to the public, including information such as known chemicals in releases or exceedances at the fence line monitors, whether or not they exceed a regulatory threshold. This information should not be included for the first time in a 72-hour report.
6. Require Direct Communication to City and School District Leadership. When CCH mobilizes to conduct air monitoring due to concerns from an incident, the school district and the city should be notified, and updated at regular intervals, so they can disseminate fact-based information to their communities.
7. Public Education. Members of our community don't always understand that the sirens only mean "shelter in place". Please fund additional education for fence line communities so we are prepared and know what actions to take during an incident. Please also consider a different level of alert for evacuations.

Thank you for your service to the Martinez community. I hope this letter encourages some reflection on your communication processes and how they limit our ability to keep our communities informed and safe. I urge you to discuss improvements to the CWS processes at your next CWS subcommittee meeting.

Sincerely,



Brianne Zorn
Mayor, City of Martinez

Cc:

Viet Tran, Bay Area Air District

Nicole Heath, Contra Costa Health Hazardous Materials Program
