

Refinery receives violation notice for sour gas release

By John Cox, Californian staff writer

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The accidental release of toxic gas from a Rosedale Highway refinery last month has prompted air regulators to issue a notice of violation to the plant, essentially kicking off months of negotiation over what size fine the operator should pay.

The notice, issued this week to Alon Bakersfield Refining by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, classifies the incident as a "nuisance" that did not cause harm.

Alon's eventual penalty probably will be relatively light -- less than several thousands dollars, which would be on the high end -- because no one's health was damaged even though "quite a large number of people" were affected, air district spokeswoman Brenda Turner said Thursday.

Regulators will take into account the company's safety record before setting the fine, she said, noting that Alon is new to the plant, which closed in early 2009 as an indirect result of the former owner's bankruptcy.

"We look at their history, which of course, they're new, so they don't have a history of violations in the past. So that's a positive," she said.

Hydrogen sulfide, also known as sour gas, was released from the refinery May 24. People nearby complained of a rotten egg smell; some reported headaches and nausea.

The air district's notice, dated Monday but received by refinery officials late Wednesday, states that the release resulted from a failure to open a "sour water stripper valve" at the plant. Hydrogen sulfide carried into the refinery drain system, the notice says, before escaping out into the atmosphere. This all occurred as part of Alon's ongoing efforts to restart the plant.

Refinery executives are expected to respond to the notice in writing, stating mitigating factors such as the accidental nature of the event and their prompt action to address the problem, Turner said.

A spokesman for the refinery's owner, Paramount Petroleum, the division of Alon USA Energy, wrote in an email that company officials plan to meet with air district representatives to hear their concerns before preparing a formal response.

Spokesman Chad Druten said the company acknowledges its responsibility and plans to cooperate with the agency.

"Whatever the case may be, Paramount Petroleum realizes the impact that our regrettable event may have had on people in the area and we apologize for that," he wrote. "These types of events are not characteristic of our operations. We are investigating to ensure that it is not repeated."

