

# Explosions at Texas petrochemical plant force over 40,000 to evacuate their homes

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30 November 2019

Evacuation orders were lifted for 40,000 people Friday as fires continued to rage at a Port Neches, Texas, petrochemical plant following multiple explosions beginning early Wednesday morning and into the afternoon. The massive explosion and subsequent fires have caused extensive damage to the city, plant and the surrounding homes.

The Southeast Texas chemical manufacturing plant is owned by Houston-based Texas Petroleum Chemical Group (TPC) and is located approximately 80 miles east of Houston in the so called “US Petrochemical Corridor.” This is the third major explosion or fire that has occurred in the area in the last year, with previous disasters injuring over 30 people and causing at least one fatality.

The corridor stretches along the southeast Texas coast up through Louisiana and accounts for the vast majority of US oil refinement with Houston alone accounting for over 42 percent of the nation’s base petrochemical capacity. The state of Texas has 27 oil refineries capable of producing over 5.1 million barrels a day, roughly 29 percent of the nation’s total capacity. Many of the residents who have grown accustomed to mandatory evacuations, in between chemical fires and explosions, are also survivors of massive hurricanes that have struck the coast, including Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and Hurricane Rita in 2005.

The first explosion in Port Neches rocked the small working class town at roughly 1:00 a.m. Wednesday, blowing doors off hinges and shattering windows. The highest elected official in Jefferson County, Judge Jeff Branick, ordered a mandatory three-mile evacuation radius around the plant, forcing over 40,000 people to flee their homes. Residents from the nearby suburbs of Nederland, Groves and the northern part of Port Arthur were also forced to evacuate.

Neither the company nor government officials from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), the state’s environmental regulatory agency, have speculated on the cause of the explosion.

Firefighters worked through the night to try and contain the inferno as secondary explosions sent billowing clouds of carcinogenic smoke into the air. The southeast Texas chemical plant specializes in refining hydrocarbons to produce 1,3-butadiene, simply referred to as butadiene. Butadiene is an ingredient in synthetic rubber, commonly used in the production of tires, plastics and hoses for automobiles.

The US Department of Labor states that butadiene is a “colorless gas that has a mild gasoline-like odor.” In addition to being “extremely flammable,” the EPA has classified butadiene as a known human carcinogen. Chronic long-term effects of exposure to butadiene still require more study, however the Department of Labor notes that “several human epidemiological studies have shown an increase in cardiovascular diseases and cancer,” while acute exposures can cause dizziness, nausea, blurred vision, skin, eye and throat irritation, as well as frostbite, vertigo, fainting and damage to the central nervous system.

The initial explosion injured three out of approximately 30 workers who were at the plant. One worker was flown by helicopter to Houston for his injuries while several residents who lived near the plant reported injuries due to the explosion, which required hospitalization. The plant has 175 full-time employees and 50 contractors that work on site. A secondary explosion, approximately twelve hours later, forced firefighters to retreat and extended the mandatory evacuation to four miles. The secondary explosion was felt over 15 miles away in the town of Beaumont.

Smoke has continued to pour out of the plant for over

two days as firefighters have sought to contain the blaze at Blocks 5, 9 and 10. The blocks include metal spires and giant spherical containers containing millions of pounds of volatile chemicals. It appears they were able to maintain the stability of the structures and have so far avoided further explosions.

While it appears the fires have been somewhat contained, returning residents remain wary of the TCEQ claims that the air quality hasn't been impacted by the release of thousands of pounds of butadiene into the atmosphere. The toothless agency has long served as a protector for the fossil-fuel industry. A 2017 investigation by the *Texas Tribune* found that the TCEQ, which is responsible for administering federal clean air laws, handed out fines for fewer than 1 percent of so-called "emissions events" that occurred within the state.

An "emission event" is when a facility emits more air pollution than is allowed by its permits, which the TPC-owned plant in Port Neches has been in violation of every quarter since 2017, according to the EPA. The EPA's "Detailed Facility Report" shows that the plant had multiple "high priority violations" for twelve straight quarters, the last being in October. Despite the company's disregard for safety regulations the EPA has only levied fines totaling \$185,100 over the last five years.

This didn't stop Mayor of Port Neches Glenn Johnson from defending the company in a Thursday news conference as a "good corporate citizen."

Residents returning to their homes have been met by collapsed roofs, toxic asbestos debris and an army of police officers, whose stated purpose is to "prevent looting." In social media posts, residents shared photos of destruction wrought to the homes and property, thanking TPC for a "lovely Thanksgiving" and "TPC 1, my house 0."

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