

Local

Officials seek those affected by emissions

By [Fanny S. Chirinos](#) ([Contact](#))

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CORPUS CHRISTI — Two meetings will be held next week to identify who may have been affected by emissions, including cancer-causing benzene, from oil tanks and flares at Citgo's East Plant in Corpus Christi.

Citgo Petroleum Corp. and its subsidiary, Citgo Refining and Chemicals Co., were found guilty June 27 on two felony counts of operating two oil/water separator tanks without roofs, required by federal law, between January 1994 and March 2002. Sentencing is scheduled for 10 a.m. on Oct. 18 in U.S. Federal District Judge John Rainey's courtroom.

The sentencing might be pushed back to December, as Citgo defense attorneys submitted a motion Thursday because of a conflict of schedules with another criminal trial.

Officials with the Environmental Crimes Section of the Justice Department want to find and notify people living or working in the Hillcrest and Oak Park communities who might have been affected by tank and flare emissions.

Citgo also operated two flares permitted as emergency flares as regular process flares, said Andrea Morrow, a spokeswoman with Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

The flares released hydrogen sulfide, which smells like rotten eggs, and sulfur dioxide between at least January 1998 and January 2003.

Attempts to reach Citgo officials Friday were unsuccessful.

Justice Department officials want to compile a list of potential victims as part of the department's obligation under the Crime Victim Rights Act and present the list to Rainey for consideration during the sentencing hearing next month. Attempts to obtain more information from department officials Friday were unsuccessful.

Local environmental activists estimate hundreds, if not thousands, of residents in the two communities have been affected by Citgo's emissions. Suzie Canales, director of the Corpus Christi-based Citizens for Environmental Justice, said the meetings were an opportunity for the affected community to be heard and counted.

"We encourage everyone to attend," she said.

Melissa Jarrell, an associate professor of criminal justice at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, has assisted the Environmental Crimes task force in disseminating information and says there may be people affected by emissions who are hesitant to come forward.

"A story that hasn't been told is that of the refinery employees," Jarrell said. "If people have been affected, they know it and we hope they come forward."

Public Meetings

Who: Officials from the Environmental Crimes Section of the Justice Department seek to identify, locate and notify persons who might have been victims of Citgo Petroleum Corp.s criminal actions.

When: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday and 3 to 9 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Oveal Williams Senior Living Center, 1414 Martin Luther King Drive

Information: 888-3283

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