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Asbestos Found At PHRT Refinery & Ocean Point Terminals, EPA Says in Community Update

The Environmental Protection Agency outlined findings from a recent inspection, confirmed the presence of asbestos, and discussed ongoing mitigation efforts for hazardous materials at the facility

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The Port Hamilton Refining & Transportation, and Ocean Point Terminals facility on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

The Environmental Protection Agency hosted an online community update meeting for St. Croix on Tuesday, and disclosed preliminary findings of a recent asbestos inspection conducted at the refinery and terminal on the Big Island's south shore.

Outgoing EPA Administrator for Region 2 Lisa Garcia said that the inspection was conducted last week at both parts of the facility – the Port Hamilton Refining and Transportation (PHRT) refinery, and the Ocean Point terminal. “This inspection evaluated compliance with asbestos provisions under the Clean Air Act,” Ms. Garcia noted. “While it was just last week, we did find asbestos,” she advised.

The EPA now must finalize their inspection report and “determine the appropriate next steps,” Ms. Garcia said.

In response to the EPA, PHRT stated, “Port Hamilton has submitted scientific data to EPA to demonstrate that concerns about asbestos at its refinery are not well-founded. It has also provided context for the earlier reports of possible asbestos risks, suggesting ulterior motives for making those allegations. Following reports provided by a contractor, NIS, that asbestos might be present at the refinery, Port Hamilton retained an independent environmental consulting firm, Analytical Environmental Services International, Inc. (“AES”), to see whether there are asbestos dangers at the facility. The results of AES’s analysis consistently found that there were no detectable levels of friable (airborne) asbestos, confirming no risk to Port Hamilton’s workers or the community.

"Port Hamilton’s efforts to ensure a safe environment for its workers and the community went further than retaining Analytical Environmental Services. For the last two years it has maintained five air monitoring stations downwind of the refinery, and provided EPA with the data, which confirmed that no hazardous material had been detected. It has also maintained eight portable air monitors around the fence line of the facility, none of which detected any pollutants.”

PHRT further stated that it has "always taken seriously the safety and health of its employees, contractors, and the community, and it will continue to work closely with federal and local agencies to ensure those protections always remain in place."

Meanwhile, work continues to mitigate the risks from liquified petroleum gas units that were discovered during a September 2023 inspection. Pat Evangelista, Director of EPA's Superfund and Emergency Management Division for Region 2, noted the [order that was issued last August](#) and said that, “We’ve been working closely with Port Hamilton...to develop a work plan and to hopefully finalize that work plan shortly, so that the removal work can begin as soon as possible.”

Responding to raised concerns about potentially having to deal with some of the removed materials by burning them on island, Mr. Evangelista acknowledged that “a portion of the containerized waste that’s at issue would be treated by the thermal oxidizer at the site.” However, he reassured that it was a process the EPA “would be monitoring closely.” The balance of the material would then be “taken off island for disposal,” Mr. Evangelista said. Via the work plan and monitoring, the EPA anticipates that any issues relating to potential emissions during the thermal decomposition process – particularly mercury – would be preemptively addressed.

The material has to be dealt with in this way, said Mr. Evangelista, because there is “no off site facility that’s prepared to accept the waste material as it currently is configured.” Port Hamilton officials have already filed an application for a permit with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources to operate the oxidizer, attendees were told.

Meanwhile, EPA's Region 2 Air Compliance Branch Manager Robert Buettner sought to allay concerns. “We use thermal oxidizers and injunctive relief to control pollutants a lot,” he noted. “It’s a commonly used device; it can control up to 99% of the pollutants.” The impact on the community will be minimal, he assured. While the oxidizer is removing volatile organic compounds from the material being processed, “you shouldn’t be experiencing any effects from

the operation of it if it's operated properly," Mr. Buettner advised.

The timeline for this aspect of the task at hand will become clearer once the work plan is established, EPA officials indicated. The EPA also noted during the meeting that they have not yet received any notification of Port Hamilton's intention to restart the refinery. "We do not have any incoming dates or emails or letters saying that they will restart operations," said Ms. Garcia.

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