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Limetree Bay Apologizes for Gas Release That Fouled Frederiksted. The Refinery Also Sought to Bring Clarity on What Was Released.

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ST. CROIX — Limetree Bay, the oil storage terminal and oil refinery on the south shore of St. Croix on Saturday afternoon apologized for a gas release that affected the west side of St. Croix in recent days, stating that it would continue to investigate the matter and had taken corrective action. Limetree Bay also sought to clarify contents of the gas release.

Saturday morning the V.I. Dept. of Health issued a release that said the Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources would continue to investigate the incident and urged residents downwind of the release to take precautionary measures.

"D.P.N.R. advises the community that the department has confirmed that there were elevated concentrations of H₂S (Hydrogen Sulfide) in the No. 8 flare header at the Limetree Bay Facility. The department is in close communications with the facility, and an investigation is ongoing to determine necessary corrective measures," stated the release. "This foul, gaseous smell, which can smell similar to rotten eggs, has permeated throughout the Frederiksted area for the past few days."

Dept. of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion stated, "Any potential threat to the health of the public is always a concern of mine. As DPNR continues to monitor environmental effects, I encourage you to report symptoms like headaches, nausea, and especially those of a respiratory nature to your healthcare provider."

The release further stated, "According to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, hydrogen sulfide can have mild to severe health impacts. Studies in humans suggest that the respiratory tract and nervous system are the most sensitive targets of hydrogen sulfide toxicity. Exposure to low concentrations of hydrogen sulfide may irritate the eyes, nose, or throat. It may also cause difficulty in breathing for some asthmatics. Respiratory distress or arrest has been observed in people exposed to extremely high concentrations of hydrogen sulfide."

The refinery sought to clarify the matter and appeared to downplay the severity of the incident, stating that the level of hydrogen sulfide release was "far below the level normally considered dangerous to health."

Here's the refinery's statement in full:

"Late evening April 22nd through the morning of April 23rd, the refinery experienced an operating upset in the sulfur processing part of the refinery. Limetree investigated and determined that this upset caused a pressure increase in some equipment, resulting in the opening of a pressure relief valve, and sending an unusually high amount of sulfur-containing gases to the flare, where they were safely burned. The pressure relief valve and flare are designed to work this way to protect the refinery workers and community."

"When the sulfur-containing gases burned in the flare, sulfur dioxide was produced. This unusually high level of sulfur dioxide coming from the flare unfortunately resulted in an odor that was evident to parts of the neighboring community. Sulfur dioxide has an odor similar to a struck match and can be smelled even at a very low concentration level, which is far below the level normally considered dangerous to health."

"The refinery workers took action to correct the upset condition, which eliminated the source of the bad odor by late morning April 23rd. After a few more hours, all traces of the odor dissipated on Friday."

"We would further like to clarify that the refinery did not experience a gas leak of hydrogen sulfide during this incident, as some media reports indicated. Hydrogen sulfide was a component in the gases that were safely burned in the flare, generating the sulfur dioxide that resulted in the odor."

"The executive management of Limetree Bay sincerely apologizes on behalf of the entire organization for the unpleasant odor that came from the refinery yesterday and for its impact on our neighbors and the community. We are committed to investigating fully the reasons for this event in cooperation with local regulators, and to implement improvements to prevent it from happening again."

"For more information or to report an issue, please contact the Limetree Bay Command Center at (340) 692-3000."

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