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Ohio's Chemical Spill Results in Delay of Dangerous Chemical Cleanup at St. Croix Refinery, EPA Says

Environment / **Published On March 29, 2023 04:49 AM /**

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The oil Refinery and Storage facility on the south shore of St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

There is another snag in operations at the Port Hamilton Refining and Transportation facility on St. Croix's south side: the removal of dangerous chemicals from the refinery has been delayed.

That's what officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) told members of the public during an online meeting on Tuesday. The operation, which was scheduled to begin next month, has been pushed back to May because a company contracted to perform the work had been diverted to attend to cleanup work at the site of the recent chemical spill in East Palestine Ohio, caused by a train derailment.

According to Lisa Garcia, EPA's Administrator for Region 2, that contractor has finished their work in Ohio, but they needed time to ship their equipment to the USVI – hence the delay.

However, ahead of the removal, EPA staffers have already completed some preliminary work: getting air monitoring systems online and ensuring that Port Hamilton effected repairs to its ammonia system, Ms. Garcia said. Agency officials will also be doing outreach on the ground in St. Croix beginning in mid-April, and the regular community meetings would continue.

Local officials have also been closely monitoring the situation and ensuring that contingency plans are in place should there be any adverse events. The local emergency planning committee has been holding weekly meetings, according to Daryl Jaschen, Director of the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA). Meanwhile, the Juan F. Luis Hospital is on standby, with Department of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion informing meeting attendees that the government had been working to ensure that the hospital had the needed resources to deal with any health emergency that might arise.

EPA inspectors, who were at the refinery following a [fire in a pile of petroleum coke](#) which smoldered for days, [found tons](#) of anhydrous ammonia, hydrogen sulphide-containing amine solution, and other volatile chemicals being stored in badly rusted, leaking equipment. Deeming the facility a potential public health hazard, the agency [ordered](#) Port Hamilton to come up with, and foot the bill for, a plan for the safe removal and disposal of the chemicals. Under the existing consent order, the company will be responsible for this work even if the refinery is sold or Port Hamilton goes bankrupt. The total cost of the cleanup work is currently unknown, said EPA Deputy Regional Administrator Walter Mugdan.

The EPA has been monitoring recent developments at the refinery since it issued an [emergency shutdown](#) order in 2021. Previous owners Limetree Bay had [restarted operations](#) in early 2021 after about a decade of being idle, but by May of that year, residents in fenceline communities surrounding the refinery had been treated to several occurrences of oil droplets being misted into the year from refinery malfunctions, coating homes, vehicles, water cisterns and crops in home gardens.

Prior to that, previous owner HOVENSA shuttered operations in 2012, following a series of Clean Air Act violations which culminated in a \$5.3 million dollar penalty from the EPA the year prior.

The latest delay marks years of concerns about the safety of residents who live in communities in the vicinity of the facility. Meanwhile, Port Hamilton is suing the EPA, claiming that the agency overstepped its authority by requiring the company apply for new permits before operations can resume. Governor Albert Bryan Jr. agreed with the company's assessment, calling the EPA shutdown “illegal” during a [press conference](#) in February of this year. However, the EPA says that the refinery's poor track record under Limetree and HOVENSA prior to that requires any future operations to be freshly permitted.