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St. Croix Residents Raise Alarm Over Unidentified Chemical Odor; Capeheart Calls for Urgent Investigation

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

ST. CROIX — Residents and workers near Port Hamilton Refining and Transportation's (PHRT) refinery on the island's south shore have been complaining about a persistent and strong chemical odor that has been affecting the community for more than a week.

People working at the Container Port, in particular, have reported a smell resembling diesel or other chemicals, and have also reported adverse health effects such as respiratory issues and headaches.

In response to rising complaints, Senator Diane Capeheart issued a release Tuesday stating that she contacted the Department of Planning and Natural Resources' Division of Environmental Protection. The division's assistant director, George Patrick, confirmed that the department has itself received several complaints from the community but has yet to pinpoint the source or cause of the odor.

In a public statement, Capeheart reminded the community of the recently formed task force by the U.S. Department of Justice designed to investigate environmental crimes in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. However, she expressed her desire for a heightened sense of urgency in resolving the ongoing issue.

"I hereby call upon all pertinent federal and local regulatory entities, particularly the Departments of Health, Planning and Natural Resources, Labor, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to immediately ascertain the source and cause of this emission and take the necessary action," Capeheart said. She stressed the need for all stakeholders to prioritize the health and safety of the people of the Virgin Islands and its neighbors.

Capeheart has committed to keeping a close watch on the issue, promising to continue following up with these entities to ensure the results of their investigation are made public. The ongoing situation underscores the critical need for swift action to alleviate the concerns and safeguard the wellbeing of the St. Croix community.

At present, it is unclear whether the odor being reported as emanating from the refinery compound could be related to ongoing work to [remove dangerous chemicals](#) that had been sitting idle at the facility. In 2021, reports of a "foul, gaseous smell" permeating the Frederiksted area were [traced back](#) to an exceedance of hydrogen sulfide at the facility.