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Environmental groups protest against Chalmette refinery

Exxon Mobil Corp.'s refinery in Chalmette uses more hydrofluoric acid at a time than any other refinery in the country, endangering the New Orleans area, environmental groups said Tuesday.

Exxon Mobil's press office in Houston did not immediately return a call for comment.

The refinery uses 2.4 million pounds in one process, said Anne Rolfes of Louisiana Bucket Brigade, which joined four other environmental groups at a news conference Tuesday.

She said the information came from Community Right to Know, which analyzed Exxon Mobil's risk management plan.

The groups quoted Exxon Mobil's plan as saying people within 25 miles of the refinery could be injured or killed by an accident at or attack on Chalmette Refining. The 80,000 within three miles at the plant would be at most risk, they said.

Hydrofluoric acid is an extremely corrosive chemical used to make high-octane gasoline. It also is used in products to clean stains such as rust and water on glass or tar on wheel covers, and especially difficult stains in dry cleaning; to etch glass; and to make computer components.

At least two cost-effective alternatives for refineries, one of them patented by Mobil, are used at other Exxon Mobil plants, the groups said.

After St. Bernard Parish residents asked the company in 1991 to phase out hydrofluoric acid, Exxon Mobil wrote that "any improvements made as a result of Mobil or industry research that are applicable will be made in Chalmette," the groups said.

The U.S. Public Interest Research Group reported in October that 50 of the nation's 153 refineries use hydrofluoric acid, and called on them to stop using the chemical.

"To our knowledge, none has," said Aaron Viles, of the Bucket Brigade's Gulf States field office.

According to Honeywell, Inc., the world's largest hydrofluoric acid manufacturing plant is its factory in Geismar.
