

# The Times-Picayune

## ST. BERNARD

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### Groups: Chemical should be phased out

### Groups: Chemical's use puts area at risk

By Steve Cannizaro

St. Bernard/Plaquemines bureau

Several environmental groups called Tuesday for Exxon Mobil Corp.'s Chalmette Refining plant to phase out the use of hydrofluoric acid, a corrosive chemical used to produce high-octane gasoline, in favor of alternative methods the groups said would be safer for the surrounding community.

The Chalmette plant uses 2.4 million pounds of the chemical in one of its refining processes, said Anne Rolfes of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, which joined four other environmental groups at a news conference on the steps of City Hall in New Orleans. The groups said that Orleans Parish, West Jefferson and other communities within 25 miles of the St. Bernard Parish plant would be at risk in the event of a large-scale accident involving the deadly chemical hydrofluoric acid, or HF as it's commonly known in the refining process.

At least two non-HF alternatives for refineries, one of them

patented by Mobil, are used at other Exxon Mobil plants, including one in Torrance, Calif., the groups said. While it could cost \$30 million to \$50 million for the Chalmette plant to change over from HF to another method, the groups said that pales in comparison to Exxon Mobil's profits for 2003: more than \$21 billion.

Officials at Chalmette Refining declined to say whether they are considering a phase-out of HF use. But a statement released by the plant said it has "implemented stringent safety, security and risk management procedures, including those related to the safe operation of our HF alkylation unit.

"We have installed HF release prevention and mitigation technology," the refinery said. "We currently have a

water-based release prevention system along with release prevention safeguards."

The refinery's statement said it is committed to being a safe and responsible corporate citizen.

Several people who live near the Chalmette plant took part in asking for the change, including Ken Ford, head of St., Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality.

Ford said that in 1991, after he asked the company — then known as Mobil — to phase out hydrofluoric acid, officials wrote back to him saying that "any improvements made as a result of Mobil or industry research that are applicable will be made in Chalmette."

But he said the change was never made in Chalmette, despite a change made at the Torrance facility.

"I would like Exxon Mobil to do the same as they did in Torrance and use a different, safer product," Ford said.

One of the products environmentalists say is safer is sulfuric acid.

But in its statement, the refinery said, "The use of HF acid versus sulfuric acid as the alkylation unit catalyst at Chalmette is based on various complicated variables including type of feedstock and other associated risks including those related to environmental and transportation issues as well as other site specific factors."

Ford's and Rolfes' groups also are involved in an unrelated lawsuit against Chalmette Refining, entailing allegations of Clean Air Act violations.

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

The environmentalists said Tuesday that three other New Orleans-area refineries — Murphy Oil in Meraux, ConocoPhillips in Belle Chasse and Marathon Ashland in Garyville — also use hydrofluoric acid in their processes.

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