

Report says Chalmette's threat is "refined"

Hydrofluoric acid makes for "danger zone" around plant

By Glynn Wilson
Contributing Writer

CHALMETTE — Ken Ford lives less than a mile from the ExxonMobil refinery in Chalmette, a place he has called home for 41 years. And while he hasn't smoked a cigarette in 30 years, he says, doctors recently removed one of his lungs. It was

cancer.

He has also noticed that a lot of his friends and neighbors are sick, and he wonders what role air pollution plays in a community that has one of the highest concentrations of chemical plants and oil refineries in the country.

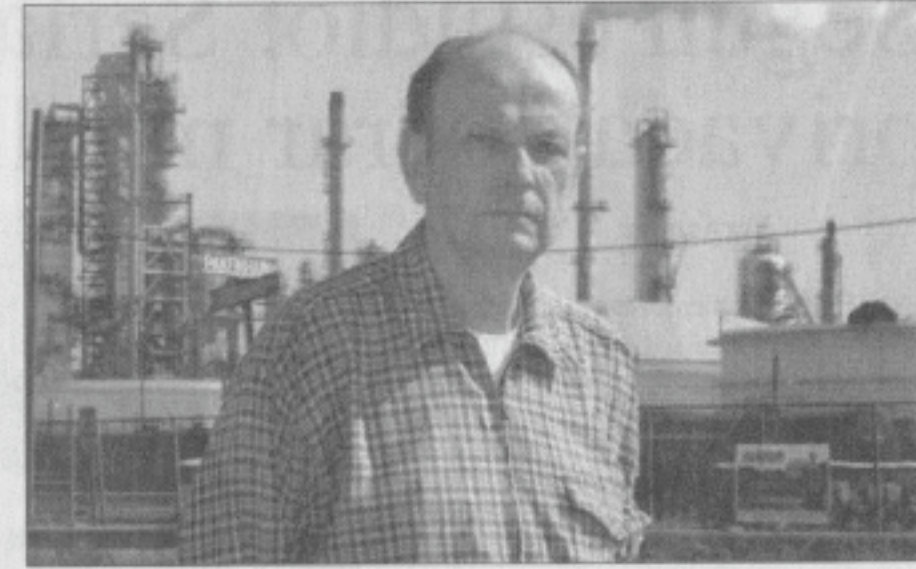
In addition to the pollution that routinely rains down on his yellow-brick home

on Carroll Drive, since Sept. 11, 2001, he's worried about the threat of a terrorist setting off a truck bomb by the plant or getting loose in the refinery.

The ExxonMobil plant stores the largest cache of hazardous hydrofluoric acid in the state, 694,000 pounds, according to a report released last week.

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Ken Ford, right, stands near the Chalmette Refinery which is near his home on Carroll and Pakenham Drives.



Chalmette's threat is "refined"

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"It's a major potential weapon, there for the taking," Ford told *The Louisiana Weekly*. "It would wipe out anything 25 miles downwind."

The chemical is used in the refining process to make high-octane gasoline to prevent engine valves from "knocking."

In 1990, Ford helped form a citizen watchdog group called St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality, and in recent years he also put up a Web site called environmentwatchdog.com.

In a press conference last week to highlight the potential terrorist threat posed by the large amount of hydrofluoric acid at the refinery, Ford was joined by Aaron Viles, Gulf States Field Director for the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, and Batya Stepelman of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, a group which monitors air and water pollution in the area.

Viles said ExxonMobil could spend the money to use a safe alternative, since it has patented safer processes and used them at plants in Utah and California. But in those states where the population has more income per capita and more political clout, the company did not make the technological changes voluntarily.

"Public pressure forced the changes there," he explained. "We could do the same here, if we could get the information to the public."

So they released a report this week called "Needless Risk: Oil Refineries and Hazard Reduction."

It documents the fact that there are five refineries in Louisiana now using hydrofluoric acid. Almost 2.5 million pounds are stored at any given time, putting almost 1.2 million people at risk in the "danger zone" around the plants.

"These plants where thousands of tons of hazardous chemicals are stored on site, present an unnecessary risk to communities that dot the American landscape and provide sitting duck targets of opportunity that an adversary could use against us," he said.

Health effects from an accidental chemical release or terrorist attack would include skin and tissue burns, eye damage, nose, throat and lung irritation, even the deadly lung disease pulmonary edema. Bone damage could also result if a person were directly exposed to an acid cloud.

"It turns your bones to Jell-O," Viles told *The Louisiana Weekly*. "We are very concerned about the risk to these communities, especially when safer technologies are readily available."

And the concern is not just coming from environmental activists. The General Accounting Office, the Army Surgeon General and the new Bush administration Homeland Security Department all issued reports point out the risk of a terrorist attack in and around oil, chemical and nuclear plants.

"Al Qaida operatives may attempt to launch conventional attacks against U.S. nuclear or chemical industrial infrastructure to cause contamination, disruption and terror," warned a report from the National Infrastructure Protection Center in February of this year.

Oil and chemical companies have taken steps to guard against a terrorist attack, mostly hiring more security guards, putting up higher fences and adding lights. But Viles said that's not enough.

Several reports demonstrate, he said, that "physical security is ineffectual at stopping a terrorist attack."

So the groups recommend alternative technologies.

These could include a solid acid catalyst, which does not pose the same risk of explosion. Or sulfuric acid could be used instead of hydrofluoric acid. If released into the air, it would not form the same kind of toxic aerosol cloud that is formed when hydrofluoric acid is set loose. And technology exists for the companies to use a modified type of hydrofluoric acid in combination with water spray systems to help prevent the formation of a toxic cloud over a community next to an oil or chemical plant.

ExxonMobil reported an accidental release of less than a pound of hydrofluoric acid on Sept. 30.

The company could not be reached for comment on the "Needless Risk" report.

Viles said he expects the company to say it is too expensive to make the changes and that it would cost jobs.

"We would argue it's not the community's role to manage their books. What we want them to do is manage their risk," he said. "The reality of it is, if it is cost effective for them to do it in other communities, why is it not cost effective for them to do it here? If they can do it in California, they can do it in Chalmette."

The report also recommends changes in government policy on the use of safer technologies at oil and chemical plants. A bill is under debate by the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee that deals with the risk of a terrorist attack on the nation's oil, chemical and nuclear plants. But while the committee supported it in 2002, it is in the process of being "watered down," Viles said.

He recommends calling Sen. John Breaux and or Sen. Mary Landrieu for people who want to express their support of federal government action to force companies like ExxonMobil to adopt safer technologies in their refineries, and to protect citizens against a terrorist attack.

As for Ford, 66, he wonders why ExxonMobil is planning to move its headquarters from New Orleans to Houston.

He said, "We're losing confidence in what ExxonMobil tells us." ♦

