Smoke from burning Navy ship in San Diego triggers health concerns, pollution monitoring

From outside Naval Base San Diego on Monday morning, several people gathered to observe the ship fire aboard the Bonhomme Richard. On Monday Navy used helicopters for water drops over the fire that continues to burn more than 24 hours later, aboard Bonhomme Richard at San Diego Naval Base.

(Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Air quality regulators tell residents who smell smoke to limit physical activity and stay inside

Smoke from a burning Navy ship in San Diego Bay continued to waft over the region Monday, as residents reported experiencing nausea and headaches.

Joaquin Guerrero, a Barrio Logan resident, woke up early Monday morning to the stench and was afraid that his home was on fire.

“I could feel it in my eyes. I could taste it. It was real strong,” he said.

Air-quality regulators were ramping up testing Monday while continuing to warn people against outdoor activity when smoke is present.

“You really need to just do what you can to limit exposure and reduce physical exertion because that makes you breathe harder,” said Bill Brick, head of monitoring and technical services for the San Diego Air Pollution Control District.

Neighborhoods immediately surrounding the still-burning USS Bonhomme Richard, which is docked at Naval Base San Diego, have been hardest hit by the pollution. That includes Barrio Logan and adjacent portside communities in National City and Chula Vista, places already burdened with high levels of air pollution.

Brick said he’s most worried about areas within a mile or two of the blaze.
Smoke from the USS Bonhomme Richard fire can be seen from 30th Street and Boston Avenue in Barrio Logan.
(Andrea Lopez-Villafaña/San Diego Union-Tribune)

“Our noses are actually quite sensitive to smoke, and that doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re in high concentrations,” he said. “The particular levels of concern would be just within a few kilometers of the fire.”

The major health threat comes from inhaled fine particulate matter, or PM2.5, officials said. The pollutant is produced by everything from burning cigarettes to diesel fuel and has been linked to increased rates of asthma and heart disease.

Brick said it’s still unknown whether the smoke also carries significant levels of toxic chemicals. Sunday night, the air district set up portable monitors in Chula Vista and in the city of San Diego.

“It very well could be more toxic than regular diesel exhaust, but we don’t know right now exactly what’s in it,” Brick said.

Navy officials initially downplayed concerns about the smoke’s toxicity, saying the fire was largely fueled by paper and rags. Then on Monday, they acknowledged that plastics and other materials were consumed in the fire.
From outside Naval Base San Diego on Monday morning, several people gathered to observe the ship fire aboard the Bonhomme Richard. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

That frustrated Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition.

“"We find it hard to believe what the Navy is saying that there's no toxins in this fire," she said. "There's virtually nothing that's built today that doesn't have some toxins in it, that isn't built out of plastic or with chemicals.

"Because we've built this major industrial military complex right on top of low-income communities of color, we have to do everything we can to protect those communities," she added.

Results from the air district's monitoring are expected within a few days.

There are also concerns the ship fire could further pollute the bay, which has been impacted by industrial chemicals and urban runoff for decades. Fishing in the water is highly discouraged, although many continue to do it.

The U.S. Coast Guard released a statement Monday saying it had contracted with an oil spill response organization. The company has been tasked with deploying booms around the ship to help contain any potential spill.

Regional water-quality regulators said they are monitoring the situation and will sample the bay for pollutants once the fire has been extinguished.

“Potential impacts could come from firefighting foam," said Sean McClain, senior engineering geologist for the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board's military facilities unit. "It depends on what's in the vessel and what's being washed off. We just don't have those details right now to understand what those constituents would be.

Determining any impacts to the bay will likely take weeks, McClain said. "The water board's concerned, but we can't make any findings or determinations until after the sampling's been completed."