

Regulators Say Bonhomme Richard Fire Smoke Not A Health Risk



Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Austin Haist / U.S. Navy

Above: Smoke rising from the USS Bonhomme Richard fire at Naval Base San Diego, July 12, 2020.

Smoke from the fire that ravaged a Navy warship in San Diego Bay contained elevated levels of toxins, but air-quality authorities said area residents had little to fear.

The [San Diego County Air Pollution Control District](#) found that smoke from the USS Bonhomme Richard contained a dozen potentially harmful substances, such as benzene, chloromethane and acetonitrile.

But the levels of those chemicals did not exceed state safety standards.

“I can’t say it was healthy to breathe, but we did not measure anything that exceeded those numbers put out by the state,” said Bill Brick, the district’s chief air pollution monitoring official.

Reported by [Erik Anderson](#)

Things like elevated levels of benzene may have come from burning fuel or plastics.

“They weren’t at super high levels but they were at levels that were higher than normal,” Brick said.

The fire mostly produced a common pollutant known as fine particulate matter.

People exposed to tiny particulate matter over a long period of time do have an elevated risk of developing respiratory ailments.

The Environmental Health Coalition’s David Flores was not surprised to learn the smoke contained toxic chemicals and he is not convinced the threat is over because the fire is out.

“We believe that there is still smoke residue in the adjacent communities, much like after a large wildfire or other big fires,” Flores said.

Flores is working with residents to collect samples of the residue.

He said complaints about the smoke started coming into his office almost as soon as the fire started burning.

“We can smell something. What is it?” Flores said. “Of course, the port-side communities of Barrio Logan and National City we started to get complaints of people getting headaches and feeling nauseous.”

The air pollution control district issued the Navy a notice of violation for creating a public nuisance and contaminating the air.

The fire began July 12 and swept through much of the ship, which was docked for a long period of maintenance. The Navy has yet to say whether the vessel will be repaired.

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Erik Anderson
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