Towering plumes, benzene fumes leave Houston noses, eyes fouled

Four-day blaze leaving concerns about cancer

Now that the four-day fire is out at a Houston-area chemical storage complex, the real danger has emerged.

Cancer-causing benzene wafted across suburbs of the fourth-largest U.S. city, shutting roads, schools and industrial plants, and disrupting everyday life for half a day. A major oil refinery in the heart of North America’s most important fuel-producing region told workers to stay home and the Texas National Guard deployed troops to assist with air monitoring. The benzene probably arose from charred chemical tanks as overnight winds sloshed remnants around, owner Intercontinental Terminals Co. said.

Even after the working-class suburb of Deer Park rescinded an order telling everyone to shut their windows and stay inside around lunchtime, the reprieve may be temporary, scientists warned. Warm temperatures that are swirling the air and dispersing the toxic fumes will disappear after sunset, potentially allowing benzene to settle at ground level, said Jeff Evans, the meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service’s Houston office.

“The air is mixing vertically now but what you need to watch for is tonight” when those conditions cease, Evans said.

Toxic fumes detected hours before dawn have panicked Houstonians normally accustomed to orange flares from the warren of refinery and chemical plant smokestacks that stretch to the eastern horizon. Even when the chemical fire erupted Sunday and sent a black anvil of smoke a mile above the city, many residents were nonchalant.

But with the fire at Intercontinental’s storage complex extinguished, the situation is actually more treacherous because the pools of naphtha and other crude-oil byproducts at the site are no longer burning off – and are free to evaporate at ground level.

“It’s making the dangers worse for the communities near the site,” said Daniel Cohan, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at Rice University. “The fires that had been burning had been burning off many of these air toxins and wafting them into a plume higher into the sky, where it was able to spread and disperse into broader regions.”

Police began dismantling barricades erected before sunrise in Deer Park, 18 miles east of downtown Houston when the shelter-in-place order was issued.