

Refineries On Danger's Edge During Power Outage

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TEXAS CITY, Texas (AP) — Schools canceled classes and residents were urged to stay inside Tuesday after power outages shut down three Houston-area refineries, including BP unit where a 2005 explosion killed 15 people, and a Dow Chemical plant.

Emergency officials were working to determine what caused the Texas City outages, which a spokeswoman for Texas New Mexico Power company said involved a "customer-owned equipment problem."

Utility spokeswoman Cathy Garber said the company provides power to the affected plants but was not the source of the outages. Garber said four "events" affected transmission lines Monday night, but said she did not have details.

Texas City's emergency sirens sounded and residents were advised to stay indoors as a precaution after the BP refinery and Dow plant lost power about 11 p.m. Monday, Texas City Homeland Security coordinator Bruce Clawson said. Valero and Marathon Oil refineries lost power nearly six hours later.

Officials said there were no immediate reports of hazardous emissions.

"There was constant monitoring going on at all times and it did not reveal anything, although there's a strong smell of hydrocarbons in the air," Clawson said.

The BP and Valero refineries activated their flaring systems after the outages, sending tall flames shooting from stacks into the sky. Marathon also activated flaring, the Galveston County Daily News reported.

Flaring allows the plants to control the release of excess gas in order to avoid unhealthy air, or explosions, inside the refineries.

A fire broke out at the BP refinery shortly after the power went out, but was quickly extinguished, spokesman Michael Marr said. He said there were no injuries at the refinery, the site of the deadly March 2005 explosion that also left 170 people injured.

Marathon quickly brought its power situation under control, Clawson said. And most of the Valero refinery's units had been safely shut down early Tuesday, spokesman Fred Newhouse said.

Workers could be seen reporting for their shifts at the BP plant around sunrise Tuesday, while flaring continued as part of the shutdown process.

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Associated Press writer Diana Heidgerd in Dallas contributed to this report.

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