

Air Quality Concerns Surround USS Bonhomme Richard Fire



The ship at Naval Base San Diego has been burning for three days, sending smoke into nearby communities. Advocates are concerned not enough is being done to help people.

Speaker 1: 00:00 As the fire that erupted aboard the USS Bonhomme Richard Sunday at Naval base, San Diego continues to burn. Community groups are worried about air quality and the impacts to neighboring communities. These are historically underserved communities of color that already struggle with high levels of air pollution. Joining me are Diane Tech Borean of the environmental health coalition and national city resident, Sandy Neuron, whole of the climate advocacy group Mothers Out Front. Thanks for being here. Thank you. Thank you, Sandy. Uh, start with you. Can you describe what the last couple of days have been like for you and the fire and the smoke near your home?

Speaker 2: 00:36 It has been a nightmare. So on Sunday when the fire started, um, in the afternoon, it felt like the fire was inside our house. We can smell the toxins in our home, even though our home, uh, we had our windows shut our doors, shut it, smell like burning plastic inside immediately. Uh, we got headaches. We didn't feel well. I have asthma. I was diagnosed with severe asthma when I was three years old because I live next to a freeway. So my asthma got triggered and, um, we immediately made a decision to evacuate

Speaker 1: 01:13 And Sandy has the smoke and smell dissipated through the week.

Speaker 2: 01:16 It has dissipated, it's still burning. So we still have our windows closed and our doors shut. We did make a decision to come back home on Monday evening. Um, but we are still taking our precautions. Um, I am a mother of two children. I do have a four year old and a two year old. And as we do know, uh, children are not small adults. That means their bodies are more vulnerable to, uh, to the toxic pollution. And

the fact is we don't even know what's in the air. We still don't know all. We know that there's a fire burning and we're still waiting.

Speaker 1: 01:51 And Diane, after downplaying concerns about the smokes toxicity at first, the Navy has acknowledged that plastics and other metals burned in the fire. What kind of impact could that have on air quality and people's health?

Speaker 2: 02:02 Well, we were very concerned about the fact that the Navy said that there was no hazards from the smoke. We knew for a fact that there were hazards from the smoke from reports that we got from Sandy and other neighbors in national city and in, um, Barrio Logan. And we know that any form of combustion is hazardous. So we know that whenever anything is burning, people should not be breathing in the smoke. We know for a fact that there were, um, toxic materials at our aboard the ship, any built environment has synthetic materials and toxic materials that when they burn are hazardous to your house,

Speaker 1: 02:42 I spoke with bill brick of the San Diego air pollution control district. Here's what he had to say right now. We're not seeing a big threat, but our advice

Speaker 2: 02:51 Is still the same. And that is that if you're smelling a strong, if you're nearby and you're smelling the strong sense of smell of smoke is really to stay

Speaker 3: 03:00 In doors, um, and keep the windows and doors closed. And then also just to reduce physical activity, because that reduces your respiration rate and reduces the amount of anything in the air that you'd be breathing in.

Speaker 1: 03:13 He also said they brought in mobile monitors to check the air quality around the ship, but the results won't be available from those air samples till later today, Diana you're satisfied with the response from local officials.

Speaker 2: 03:26 We're very dissatisfied with the response. There was no response from any County agency all day Sunday. The only response was from the city of national city that advised its residents to stay in doors and limit, uh, activity. The advice from the County didn't come and tell later on Sunday night, and then the danger was really downplayed. So we were very concerned about that. And it's clear to us that there is no emergency response plan for this type of a disaster. We've built this major military industrial complex, right on top of a community of color and low income community, where folks are already sick because the pollution every day is bad and people are already impacted by that air pollution. And then to put this assault on top of it with no response was completely unacceptable. The response has gotten better over the last couple of days, but it was really not good when people needed it the most, the first and second day.

Speaker 1: 04:28 And we should mention a County spokesman sent us a statement saying that public advisory started going out in English and Spanish on Sunday. And the port is announced yesterday, it's allocating \$200,000 to help with relocation and air quality assistance to residents impacted by the fire. And Diane is this enough?

Speaker 2: 04:46 I think these are very good responses. And unfortunately they came too late for some people like Sandy, who had to make the decision herself to move her family. We should have had those resources in place on Sunday, and we should have deployed them immediately. That said, I think we're taking a big les-

son from this event and we need a disaster plan for the future because we know it'll happen again. Some other kind of disaster will probably happen again and we'll need a good disaster relief plan.

Speaker 1: 05:20 So that's what you'd suggest too about what else should be done to keep residents safe, learn from this one.

Speaker 2: 05:26 Yes. I think it's really important that we have a disaster plan in place that residents receive the kind of information that they need in order to evacuate or shelter in place. And also that we do air monitoring immediately. We understand that, um, the air pollution control district has deployed some monitors, but to my knowledge, there were no monitors on Sunday. Um, and we believe those could have been there could have been deployed. So we would have had that information, that information is lost forever to us. Now,

Speaker 1: 06:00 Is there anything being done to monitor air quality in these neighborhoods longterm?

Speaker 2: 06:04 Yes. There are, um, air monitors in Chula Vista and in Sherman Heights, there has been some mobile monitoring and some smaller monitors Sandy's involved in a campaign to get more monitoring. And she could talk more about that with a special program Drew's out of California, air resources board, and the air pollution control district. So we're excited about that, but we really need emergency response.

Speaker 1: 06:31 Now tell us about that program, Sandy.

Speaker 2: 06:33 Yeah, so fortunately for our neighborhoods, we were selected through the AB six one seven, um, to be funded, to eliminate toxic emission. Our communities rank in the five to 10%, most polluted neighborhoods in California. So that's what God has, um, the funding from the state. So this program is looking into developing a blueprint of how we're going to reduce it. So that's how we had monitoring going on. We've had mobile monitoring from Aclima to show us the data and what is going on. So that can tell us where we can put the resources in, but just like Diane said, our agencies are not equipped to do emergency preparedness. And that is a problem because we've known for years that these are dangerous, that these let the Navy and NASSCO and all these other, um, businesses that operate next for neighborhoods, neighborhoods, uh, pose a danger to our health. So that's why we've had these discussions. We were able to qualify for this funding, but most importantly, how do we make sure that we are prepared for an incident that none of us predicted what happened on a Sunday?

Speaker 1: 07:49 I've been speaking with Diane tech Valorian of the environmental health coalition and national city residents, Sandy neuron Hill of the climate advocacy group, mothers up front. Thanks to you both for joining us.

Speaker 2: 08:01 Thank you. Thank you.