

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

Gas leak forces evacuation

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SANTA CRUZ — A cloud of chlorine gas escaped from a broken pipe fitting at the Neary Lagoon sewage treatment plant Monday morning, injuring three construction workers and forcing the evacuation of nearby houses.

The gas escaped shortly before 9 a.m. when a pipe fitting burst, emitting a low-hanging, 80-foot-long cloud of lime-green gas. Three construction workers inhaled the gas and were taken to Dominican Hospital by ambulance. Two of the workers were treated and released while the third, a man identified

only as Frank Chiba, remained in stable condition at Dominican Hospital Monday night.

Steve Wolfman, an engineer with the city Public Works Department, said the pipe has been repaired but that the chlorinating system at the plant will remain shut down until the system manufacturer examines the break.

Firefighters said that the cloud posed only a small danger to area residents before it dispersed.

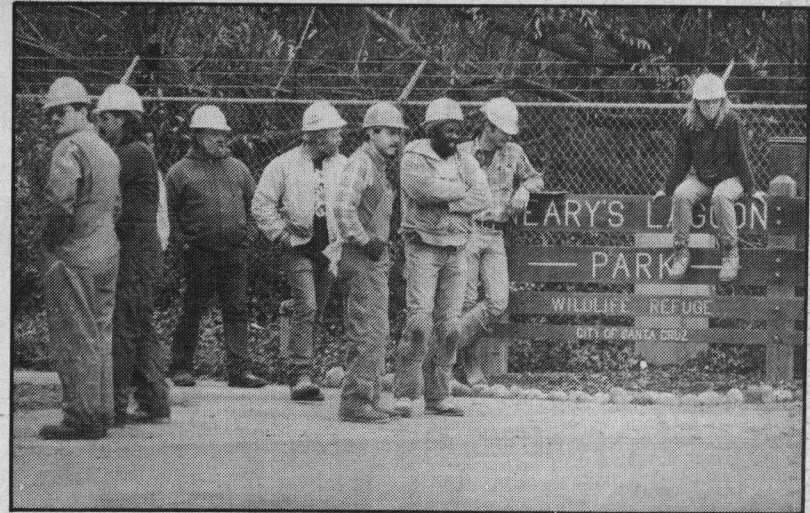
"People were asked to evacuate as a precautionary measure," said Pat Brown, Santa Cruz Fire Department deputy chief. "The amount of exposure would have been irritating compared to dangerous."

The break came as city and private construction workers were installing equipment during construction on a new sewage treatment plant.

The leak was at a pressure-valve fitting on a line leading from a one-ton storage cylinder of chlorine. The gas is used to treat wastewater. Wolfman said that only a small amount of the gas, possibly 100 pounds, escaped before a worker was able to reach a shut-off valve.

Chris Bayer, a labor foreman for Huffman Construction which is working on the new plant, said he heard, then saw a "hissing sound and a lot of green gas."

Please see LEAK — A10



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Sewage plant workers wait for chlorine cloud to blow away.

Leak forces evacuation

Continued from Page A1

Approximately 50 construction workers fled from the gas, taking refuge on the sidewalk in front of the treatment plant along California Street. Police cordoned off the area after the low-hanging cloud started to work its way toward the ocean.

"I didn't take long to get everybody moving," said Bayer.

"If they tell you there's a (chlorine) leak you don't hang around to see where it's coming from," said Bruce Nethers, another construction worker.

As the gas cloud formed, several construction workers ran from house to house on Bay Street telling residents to evacuate. Firefighters said that had the cloud posed more of a threat they would have

begun an official evacuation, telling people where to go and how long they would have to clear the area.

The cloud dispersed and the street was re-opened about an hour and a half later. Wolfman said such accidents will be eliminated once the new treatment plant is completed in September. The new plant has an enclosed treatment ar-

ea which will trap the gas should such a leak occur again.

The sewage plant may produce more noxious odors than normal until the chlorinating system is back on line, Wolfman said.

"We shouldn't have any problems," Wolfman said. "The wastewater is still going through all the other treatment and will still be partially chlorinated."