

DEQ cites Sinclair for spill

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CHEYENNE — The Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality has cited Sinclair Refinery for a spill that released nearly 3 million gallons of potentially explosive fluid last spring.

Sinclair failed to take steps to prevent the May 3 spill — one of the biggest in Wyoming history — by fixing leakage at the tank where the spill originated, the department said in the Dec. 30 violation notice.

Meanwhile, a top regulator expressed continuing frustration Monday that Salt Lake City-based Sinclair has not given state inspectors access to the inside of the tank at the refinery a few miles east of Rawlins.

“We’ve had some difficulties with them following through the way they need to after a spill of this size,” said Bob Breuer, inspection and enforcement manager for the department’s Solid and Hazardous Waste Division.

The spill of light straight run, a substance that can be blended with gasoline, happened when a floating storage tank roof took on fluid and sank. The roof punctured the tank bottom in several places, causing the release of 65,000 barrels of gasoline-grade fluid onto the refinery grounds.

The department is seeking a penalty but won’t make that amount public, Breuer said.

“We won’t discuss it with anyone but Sinclair. That’s the fair, straightforward way to go about it,” he said.

Department spokesman Keith Guille said he couldn’t speak to whether the fine amount is subject to release under Wyoming’s open-records laws.

Such information typically isn’t released before the department and entity being fined negotiate the final penalty amount, he said.

“Until we sit down and talk with Sinclair, we don’t have a final number to determine what the settlement’s going to be,” Guille said.

A message left with the department’s attorney, John Burbridge, wasn’t returned Monday.

Breuer said Sinclair has expressed interest in settling the citation without going to court.

Refinery manager Mike Bellinger didn’t return a phone message Monday seeking comment.

The violation notice says Sinclair failed to address leakage into the pontoons that held up the floating tanks. A contractor documented the leakage some months before the spill, but the refinery lost track of the report and didn’t correct the problem, Bellinger told The Associated Press in November.

A similar incident happened at the refinery in 2007.

The roof of a tank containing crude oil sank and punctured the bottom of the tank, causing a much smaller spill than the one in 2009, according to department records and Bellinger.

The tank where last year’s spill happened was last fully cleaned in 1987. Sinclair officials have told the department that the tank bottom has a layer of built-up petrochemical sludge, Breuer said.

Because the tank has been out of commission more than 90 days, Breuer said, the tank now is considered a hazardous waste site under the law.

The violation notice tells Sinclair to “identify and characterize” the remaining waste by March 1.