



Federal authorities have opened a criminal investigation of Chevron after discovering that the company detoured pollutants around monitoring equipment at its Richmond refinery for four years and burned them off into the atmosphere, in possible violation of a federal court order, The Chronicle has learned.

Air quality officials say Chevron fashioned a pipe inside its refinery that routed hydrocarbon gases around monitoring equipment and allowed them to be burned off without officials knowing about it. Some of the gases escaped into the air, but because the company didn't record them, investigators have no way of being certain of the level of pollution exposure to thousands of people who live downwind from the plant.

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