

Spill report late

By GEORGE MATHEWSON
The Observer

Sarnia is demanding hard answers after a chemical spill went unreported to civic officials for more than four hours Thursday.

About 140 litres of gasoline entered the St. Clair River from the Suncor Energy refinery around 5:30 p.m., releasing small amounts of benzene, toluene and other chemicals before the leak was brought under control 90 minutes later.

Suncor called the Ontario Environment Ministry at 8:44 p.m. and Walpole Island and Wallaceburg closed their drinking water intakes sometime after 11 p.m. Thursday.

Under the Environmental Protection Act, anyone who causes a spill likely to have an adverse impact is required to notify both the ministry and the host municipality.

But Sarnia didn't learn of the spill until 11:29 p.m. and only then because a health official called.

"What do we have to do to get people to understand that they have a full responsibility to be accountable?" said an angry Mayor Mike Bradley.

"This will feed the paranoia downriver, and rightfully so. What are we being told? Why didn't they tell us?"

Cal Gardner, Sarnia's emergency co-ordinator, said city officials first spoke with Suncor at 11:30 p.m. When a dispatcher asked if a spill had occurred the Suncor official initially denied it, Gardner said.

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"We need to know because people call us ... We've been dealing with this over and over and over, and it's the same issue. Yes, I'm frustrated."

Suncor issued a standard news release Friday morning stating the company's top priority is the safety and security of the Sarnia community.

But after being asked about the delays and looking into them personally, vice-president Kirk Bailey promised an investigation to find out what went wrong.

"When I look at how this was handled (Thursday night) it's just clearly not up to snuff."

Bailey said he's especially disappointed because a review this week concluded the Chemical Valley's communication practices are improving.

"Did we do the best we could? In this case I'd say we fell down," he said.

Computer modeling and water sampling suggest very low levels of chemicals moved downstream from Sarnia, the Environment Ministry said.

Asked if charges could be laid over the slow notification, ministry spokesperson John Steele said Suncor must file a report outlining its response.

"If we feel we have concerns about that we'll turn it over to the investigations and enforcement branch," he said.

The spill forced the closure of drinking water intakes for the fourth time in eight months. Walpole Island acted independently and Wallaceburg shut its water plant on the advice of the medical officer of health.

Bradley said Sarnia is tired of being left out of the loop. At a recent community summit, a key issue raised was the city's negative image and how groups need to work together to change it, he said.

"I think they need to shake-up the Ministry of the Environment here. The mindset seems to be the same one that's been there the last eight years."