

Limetree CEO addresses refinery's ill-fated restart

Refinery could be sold

By SUZANNE CARLSON
Daily News Staff

Limetree Bay refinery CEO Jeffrey Rinker held his first press conference Tuesday to address the brief but disastrous restart that has left at least 1,200 nearby homes coated in oil particles and hundreds of refinery employees and contractors laid off.

"With no cash coming in from investors," and the refinery not generating revenue, the company is preparing for "a shutdown period of unknown and indefinite duration," Rinker said. As part of the bankruptcy process, "we'll begin to explore a potential sale of the refinery assets."

According to media reports, the refinery's owners spent \$4.1 billion in an effort to restart the facility and need to raise another \$1.2 billion to complete the job.

Rinker said he remains hopeful that the refinery might eventually restart operations — but was realistic about a possible timeline.

"It's not a few months. It's more like a year, or years, I would expect. And really, the answer is we don't know. But it will take time. And if we thought there was a possibility for a fast restart for the refinery, we wouldn't be taking the step of releasing the employees," Rinker said.

Limetree's own bankruptcy attorney is less hopeful, calling the refinery's current actions a "controlled crash landing," in an emergency hearing in bankruptcy court.

The Labor Department is holding informa-

tion sessions at the refinery today and tomorrow for the 271 direct employees who have been laid off.

Rinker said Tuesday that "given time, we would have shown this could have been a positive."

However, problems and accidents at the refinery that left residents breathing chemical fumes for days on end, and resulted in the Environmental Protection Agency ultimately issuing an emergency shutdown order on May 14, have made the refinery untouchable to many investors, according to Reuters.

"Everybody has a right to live in a clean environment, and everybody also has the right to live in a healthy economy as well," Rinker said. "We just never got a chance that we could prove that we could deliver."

Since the refinery officially restarted operations in February, residents repeatedly reported foul odors, gas releases, and a sheen of oil droplets coating homes, cars, crops, and roofs that drain rainwater into cisterns for drinking water.

The U.S. Justice Department recently filed a complaint saying refinery officials publicly minimized serious accidents and chemical releases that endangered St. Croix residents' health as early as December, two months before the refinery officially restarted operations.

Rinker said that there were only two "incidents" at the refinery that caused oil particles to spray over neighborhoods — the first on Feb. 4, and a second, more serious flaring event on May 12.

The refinery had been previously shut down in 2012 after years of economic troubles were compounded by similar accidents and violations of the Clean Air Act.

"The refinery works. We saw it run through January and through May, and we had incidents, but the refinery ran," Rinker said.

Limetree Bay officials used the VI. Territorial Emergency Management system to send out an alert to residents about the May 12 flare, but no public notice was issued after the Feb. 4 incident.

"We did not put out a press release," Rinker said.

For over a month, residents of the Clifton Hill neighborhood complained about the pollution in online forums. Limetree Bay finally publicly acknowledged the event in a statement issued on March 3, which gave only vague details.

The company said that "initial investigations did not reveal any impact beyond the refinery's fence line. Once Limetree was made aware that there was impact to the community, our environmental teams were immediately dispatched to neighboring areas to assess that impact."

Limetree Bay ignored repeated inquiries from The Daily News at the time, and refused to say what date the flare occurred, and how many homes and cisterns were affected.

The company did inform the Department of Planning and Natural Resources of the oil spray, but the Virgin Islands government didn't alert the public.

The company did not contact any federal agencies about the Feb. 4 incident, according to EPA spokesman Elias Rodriguez.

Rinker said Tuesday he was unsure of exact figures, but estimated the number of homes affected by the Feb. 4 incident was around 100. Limetree Bay spokeswoman Erica Parsons clarified in a subsequent email that approximately 180 homes had been affected.

On May 12, "the number of homes that were in the area that potentially would have been affected by the incident were about 2,000 homes, and we believe that we've been out in the neighborhoods and looked at every one of those homes," Rinker said. "If we missed you,

please do let the refinery know." The company has been providing drinking water and offering settlements, and "we think that we've been to everyone."

Out of those 2,000, some of those properties didn't have any oil effects on them at all because it was kind of scattered, and some did," Rinker said. "Around 1,000 people have come to a settlement agreement. In most cases that they are going to receive money for the necessary cleanup of their property."

For the rest, "either there were no effects or they did not agree to a settlement," Rinker said.

He also said reports that the refinery had not been conducting air monitoring are false, and said testing was being done.

"I hope this addresses the idea that the refinery is somehow not monitoring our emissions. We're certainly monitoring and reporting our emissions as required," Rinker said.

Parsons did not respond to questions from The Daily News about whether the company intends to make that data public.

With approximately 1,200 homes sprayed with oil during the three months the refinery was active, The Daily News asked Rinker how many more homes would have been an acceptable number before ceasing operations.

"None of these incidents should have happened, and nobody should have specks of oil or particles of oil" on their property, Rinker said. "The answer is zero. It should not happen. It did. We're sorry, but it did happen."

Rinker declined to comment on the refinery's impact to public health.

"I know that there are people who feel they've had ill health effects," Rinker said.

There are several class-action lawsuits pending against the refinery and "because this is now a legal case, I really can't talk about that," Rinker said.

St. Croix gunshot victim found sitting in vehicle late Tuesday night is territory's latest slaying

Daily News Staff

The VI. Police Department is investigating the violent death of a man

Tuesday night on St. Croix. According to Police spokesman Toby Derima, the 911 Emergency Call Center received a report at 10:21 p.m. of a

man sitting in his vehicle in Estate Carlton with a gunshot wound.

The man was dead when the officer arrived on the scene, Derima said.

At press time this morning, VI. Police were on the scene investigating the homicide.

The man's death is the 22nd homicide

of the year on St. Croix and the 28th in the territory. There have been five homicides on St. Thomas and one on St. John.

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