

SEPA Mossmorran investigation in final stages as agency's regulation drives investment to make flaring "the exception rather than routine"

19 December 2019

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) today (19 December 2019) updated stakeholders on the progress of its regulatory investigation into "unacceptable" flaring by ExxonMobil Chemical Limited during Easter 2019.

The agency also outlined the steps it continues to take to tackle the unacceptable impacts of flaring from the operation of the Mossmorran facility.

Regulatory investigation concluding

On Thursday 25 April 2019 SEPA announced a formal regulatory investigation into the unacceptable flaring from the ExxonMobil Chemical Limited site in Fife that started on Sunday 21 April.

SEPA today confirmed that the investigation is now in the final stages. A small number of interviews remain to be conducted and a further update will be provided in the new year.

Operating permit variations

SEPA has served a series of permit variations to lock in compliance at Mossmorran and reduce flaring impacts. The operating permit variations served on ExxonMobil Chemical Limited and Shell U.K. Limited have required both operators to achieve 'Best Available Techniques' in the shortest timeframe possible.

The variations will lead to investments in equipment that reduces the impacts of flaring on local communities when flaring is necessary. Flaring, an important safety feature of industrial facilities, will become the "exception rather than routine" and new infrastructure will address the issues that cause most disturbance to local people.

New infrastructure

SEPA expects investment in noise-reducing flare tips and fully enclosed ground flare technologies at Mossmorran and that these will significantly reduce the impact on the rare occasions when flaring is necessary.

Noise reducing flare tips are to be installed by the operators within the following timescales:

- ExxonMobil Chemical Limited in 2020
- Shell U.K. Limited in 2021

ExxonMobil Chemical Limited has committed to optimising timescales to install new ground flares – which will significantly address impacts from flaring. SEPA welcomes the £140 million investment announced by ExxonMobil Chemical Limited and the assurances that reliability and performance will improve.

Shell U.K. Limited must provide SEPA with a project plan by the end of January 2020 for their future use of ground flares. SEPA is currently reviewing the detailed plans for the installation of ground flares that were received from ExxonMobil Chemical Limited at the end of October 2019.

Monitoring

SEPA continues to monitor air quality around Mossmorran. Regular reports have been published on our Mossmorran Hub and the results from these consistently show that levels of particulate matter are well within daily (UK) Air Quality Standards.

Currently, SEPA has air quality monitoring equipment at Lochgelly, Auchtertool and Donibristle. These locations ensure that we can monitor in local communities and take account of changes in wind direction. It also means we can monitor both upwind and downwind of the Mossmorran Complex.

SEPA is planning for these monitors to stay in place whilst the investments are made at Mossmorran. SEPA is also working alongside partner agencies with air quality responsibilities to assess future requirements.

Noise monitoring has also been carried out by SEPA in response to unplanned flaring. The data from this monitoring is associated with our regulatory investigations and cannot be published at this time.

If you do not have access to the internet and would like copies of our Air Quality Summary Reports, please contact [03000 99 66 99](tel:03000996699).

ExxonMobil Chemical Limited restart

ExxonMobil Chemical Limited has confirmed that the safe, responsible and considered re-start of the Fife Ethylene Plant at Mossmorran will now occur in January. SEPA has been advised of limited, low-level volume flaring at Mossmorran on Sunday 22 December as ExxonMobil Chemical Limited prepares for this start-up. We will continue to monitor air quality throughout.

Further to detailed dialogue with the operator, SEPA welcomes the commitment to pause re-start operations during the Christmas and New Year period, and to work to minimise the impact of those operations on in the New Year.

In addition to an active programme of communications from the company, SEPA's specialist regulatory and scientific officers will fully monitor the re-start. We'll provide regular updates during the re-start and will publish monitoring information as quickly as possible on sepa.org.uk/mossmorran

Ian Buchanan, SEPA Chief Officer Compliance and Beyond, said:

“SEPA has been clear that flaring at Mossmorran has been both preventable and unacceptable. Having served final warning letters on both operators in 2018, our investigation into Easter 2019 flaring by ExxonMobil Chemical Limited is now in its final stages, with a small number of interviews remaining to be conducted. It’s important we complete the investigation and a further update will be provided in the new year.

“Aligned with this we’re taking the action required to ensure that the operators of the Mossmorran Complex (both ExxonMobil Chemical Limited and Shell UK Limited) make the investment needed to address the root causes of unacceptable flaring and mitigations. This includes the installation of noise reducing flare tips in 2020/21, the £140m investment programme and totally enclosed ground flares to follow will ensure flaring becomes the exception rather than routine and when flaring does occur the communities are protected from unacceptable impacts.

“SEPA welcomes the commitment to pause re-start operations during the Christmas and New Year period, and to work to minimise the impact of those operations on in the New Year. SEPA’s specialist regulatory and scientific officers will fully monitor the re-start. We’ll provide regular updates during the re-start and will publish monitoring information as quickly as possible on sepa.org.uk/mossmorran”

Ends

Notes to editors

- For further information, including a copy of our recently distributed community newsletter, is available at sepa.org.uk/mossmorran
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