

BioLab factory fire spews chlorine gas cloud near Atlanta, Georgia

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A massive fire broke out on Sunday morning at a chemical factory 30 miles east of Atlanta, Georgia, causing large-scale evacuations and the shutdown of Interstate 20 after chlorine gas was detected in the air.

More than 17,000 people in Conyers, Georgia, were told by county officials to evacuate the area after the BioLab facility caught fire and was essentially destroyed. The company specializes in making chemicals for pool and spa water care.

A massive plume of dark smoke rose above the factory, visible from miles away. Residents across three counties—Fulton, DeKalb and Gwinnett counties—reported a haze covering the area as well as a strong smell of chlorine. Chlorine is a toxic gas that can have damaging short- and long-term health impacts.

By Sunday evening, another 90,000 people were told to shelter in place in Rockdale County as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Georgia's environmental department ran tests for the presence of harmful levels of chlorine, hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide in the air.

On Monday, Associated Press interviewed Arynne Johnson from Suwanee, Georgia, approximately 30 miles northwest of Atlanta, who said the foggy air, “slapped you in the face,” and “it felt like walking into a pool house.” Johnson said she got a headache, she has been coughing and, “my upper chest and throat have been tight all day.”

The health risks from the fire and gas plume are impacting millions of people in the Atlanta area. Meanwhile, communication from government agencies has been lacking and, whatever statements have been released, are contradictory and confusing.

Rockdale County, for example, initially lifted the shelter-in-place order on Monday and then issued a press release on Tuesday that said, “The plume has

been moving across the county, influenced by the weather,” and then reissued the shelter-in-place through 7:00 a.m. Friday, October 4. The county also closed all courts and offices for the rest of the week.

Rockdale County Fire Chief Marian McDaniel told news media the fire started when a sprinkler head malfunctioned around 5:00 a.m. on Sunday, which caused water to mix with water-reactive chemicals. McDaniel also said that BioLab employees were in the building when the fire began. The company issued a statement on Sunday saying, “Our employees are all accounted for with no injuries reported.”

BioLab is a division of KIK Consumer Products, based in Lawrenceville, Georgia, a \$3.5 billion global manufacturer of cleaners, bleach, laundry and dish care products with 16 production facilities in North America and South Africa and 2,500 employees.

Although BioLab has issued a statement claiming its “top priority” is the safety of the community, the firm has been cited and fined by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for numerous safety violations between 2015 and 2019.

According to a report by Atlanta News First, BioLab has repeatedly failed to provide safety training for staff and, in 2020, was cited by the US Chemical Board for five safety violations that contributed to a massive fire at its Lake Charles, Louisiana, manufacturing facility during Hurricane Laura, which also released a chlorine gas plume into the area.

The *Journal-Constitution* reported on Sunday that there have been at least three such fires at the same BioLab facility over the last two decades. In May 2004, a huge fire broke out in a warehouse at the Conyers, Georgia complex that set off multiple explosions and caused the evacuation of 300 people as a chlorine-laden cloud rolled through the area. The Associated

Press reported at the time, that a plume of green, gray and white smoke stretched ten miles long and at least nine people went to hospitals with complaints of burning eyes and lungs.

Two more fires erupted in 2015 and 2016 at the complex, the second of which caused voluntary evacuations around the Conyers BioLab complex.

Dr. Andrew Whelton of Purdue University, who assessed the damage after the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio in February 2023, told Atlanta 11-Alive, “If you’re in the evacuation area, you should be concerned and you should not be in that area. If you’re outside the evacuation area and you smell chemicals, you have a right to be concerned,” he said. “And you also have a right to then encourage emergency management officials to explain to you what exactly is happening and why you are allowed to be where you are.”

Whelton, who is a specialist in environmental and ecological engineering added that, if and when it is clear that residents can return home, they should call their homeowners insurance companies to see if they will pay for an in-home testing of the carpet, walls and soil. Whelton emphasized that the threat to public health is not limited to the visible presence of a chemical fire.

He said, “Potentially, the impacts of this could be longer than a few days or weeks. It really depends upon the chemicals that are being discharged into the atmosphere or are allowed to run off, from the site to, you know, stormwater ditches and such.”

Whelton described some of the health impacts of exposure to pool and spa chemicals at high concentrations. He said people “will experience upper respiratory problems, inhalation issues, ear, nose and throat issues. And, this can be, temporary or it can be long term.”

Lastly, Whelton said, “And for those people outside the evacuation area, they need to petition the government agencies to tell them why it is okay for them to be where they are, especially if they smell it inside their homes.”

On Tuesday, the *Journal-Constitution* reported that at least six complaints were filed against BioLab and its parent company, KIK Consumer Products. The lawsuits, filed in Gwinnett County State Court, Rockdale County Superior Court and the federal district

court in Atlanta, focus on health and property-related issues tied to emergency evacuation and shelter-in-place orders.

Daniel Flynn, an attorney representing Rockdale residents Fannie and Albert Tartt in a federal complaint, said, “What’s especially egregious is that the defendants have been here before—having exposed this community in a similar fashion over the past 20 years. The defendants, not the community, should bear the costs of the defendants’ conduct.”



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