Exxon firefighters continue to pour water on the coker unit where a fire broke out Monday morning. Small fires continued to pop up in the structure more than 12 hours after the original blaze began.

Blaze's effect on Exxon output minimal

By DOBBY LAMB
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Production at Exxon's Baton Rouge refinery continued Monday in the aftermath of a fire that destroyed a "coking" unit that accounts for only a fraction of the refinery's production capacity, officials said.

Unlike a December 1989 Exxon refinery explosion that disrupted production for several days, the coking unit outage should not cause any problems for Exxon refinery customers, said Les Rogers, an Exxon spokesman in Houston.

However, the company might have to adjust plant operations to offset the loss of the damaged coking unit. The company would not elaborate on its alternative production plans.

News of theStatus of the nation's second largest refinery outcrude oil, gasoline and heating oil prices higher in early trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange before the extent of damage was known.

Crude oil for delivery in September finished the day 9 cents higher at $17.87 per barrel.

Unleaded gasoline initially climbed 24 cents before dropping back 22 cents to settle a penny higher at 52.17 cents per gallon. Home heating oil for delivery next month closed at 31.14 cents per gallon, a 0.37 cent increase.

"There are so many ways to compensate for situations like this, we don't see that this is going to affect our ability to meet commitments," said Waff Eldredge, a spokesman for the Baton Rouge refinery.

The damaged coking unit—one of three at the refinery—is at the end of the refining process. When crude oil enters the refinery it is "distilled" into various fuel and other refined products.

Left over from the crude distillation process is heavier resid oil—a tar-like substance that can be used to make asphalt, heavier tube oils or used as feedstock to a coker unit, such as the one damaged Monday.

These units produce coke, a porous coal-like substance used as fuel much like coal, or as an electrode to extract metals from ore. The coking units also pump more gasoline, jet fuel and other higher grade products out of the residue oil.

Exxon has the flexibility to make up for the lost coking unit because the coke is one component of the refinery, and the refinery is one of four operated by Exxon in the United States, said Dave Gardner, another spokesman at the Baton Rouge refinery.

"Is it a big impact on the refinery? No," Gardner said of damaged coking unit.

The damaged coker has a daily capacity of 32,000 barrels, about one-third of the daily 90,000-barrel capacity of the Baton Rouge refinery's three cokers, Eldredge said.

"I don't think it's enough to make a difference, myself," said William Kondol, an analyst for New York-based Salomon Brothers Inc.

The Baton Rouge refinery is Exxon's largest, with a daily processing capacity of 421,000 barrels of crude oil—nearly 43 percent of Exxon's total U.S. capacity.

Exxon's per-barrel capacity at the other refineries is 296,000 at Baytown, Texas; 128,000 at Benicia, Calif.; and 42,000 at Blinton, Miss.

Eldredge said Monday's fire did not cause any known damage to the refinery other than the coker unit.

"The damage here you would not expect to be widespread like an explosion," Eldredge said.

A December 1989 explosion temporarily idled the Baton Rouge refinery while the company assessed damage and made repairs.

The accident also disrupted the movement of raw material from the refinery to the chemical plant at the Exxon complex in north Baton Rouge.

The chemical plant continued normal operations Monday, said Bryan Braithvan, Jr., a spokesman for the plant.

made up of four 100-foot metal drums set about 40 feet in the air and topped with 100-foot high drilling derricks. After the fire, two of the derricks were gone and the two that remained leaned to one side.

Although some asbestos was found in debris around the plant, Gardner stressed that monitoring of air quality showed no health hazard is expected.

"Asbestos is only a problem if it's in the air," he said.

Gardner asked anyone in the area around the plant who finds any material to call 615-811-3332.

"We ask that they not pick it up, he said, "If they really want to do something, they can call us down."

Gardner said crews will search for debris in a one square mile area bordered by Scenic Highway, Flann Road, Chippea Street and Evangeline Street, and will also respond to all citizens' reports of debris.

Thick black smoke hung over the area around the refinery in the early morning until the fire was under control. After the fuel was shut off, the smoke became paler and less dense.

Exxon and Department of Environmental Quality officials said no off-site health problems are expected.

DEQ as set up monitors at various points along Exxon's fence line between 6 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. and found no abnormal readings, said Servaia Mani, DEQ's regional coordinator for air quality surveillance.

"There was so much smoke and the smell was crazy. I was sick, I couldn't even go to work this morning."

- Resident Marie Wilson

He said Exxon air monitoring equipment detected hydrocarbon and carbon monoxide, but not in amounts that would be harmful.

Ten people normally work in the three coker units, but officials were unsure how many people were on the east unit when the fire started. They also could not tell where on the unit the missing people had been working.

A dozen firefighters from Exxon's primary fire squad arrived within minutes of the report of the blaze. They were followed, within 15 minutes, by more than 70 others from volunteer fire squads at the refinery and Exxon's chemical plant.

The Baton Rouge Fire Department went out to the scene and was able to assist the Exxon fire crews, but did not actively fight the fire.

"The city fire department would not normally respond to this type of fire," Eldredge said.

Other agencies at the scene included the fire department's hazardous materials unit, state police and its hazardous materials unit, city police, Emergency Medical Services, the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Reactions to Monday's fire from residents living near the plant varied, largely depending on what time they woke up.

Pondale Street resident Marie Wilson said she is still concerned about what she may have inhaled every morning.

Wilson, 33, who lives southeast of the fire site, said she got up about 3 a.m. to fix her husband's lunch and prepare for work.

Outside, she said, the air was terrible.

"There was so much smoke and the smell was crazy," she said. "I was sick. I couldn't even go to work this morning."

Wilson, who is pregnant, said plant officials should have warned nearby residents as soon as the fire began.

On Monday afternoon, she said she still felt a little queasy and was still trying to decide whether to see a doctor.

"I just hope to God nothing's wrong with my child," she said.

Resident Hilbert Craft said he was up about 6:30 a.m. and noticed the heavy smoke in a lot next to his house.