**Headline:** How Washington State Can Protect Workers at Oil Refineries

By Tom Conway

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**[Article Body:]**

The grief hits Scott Campbell like a ton of bricks every time he walks into the union hall and sees the memorial to the fallen workers.

Seven members of the United Steelworkers (USW) union reported for their shifts at the former Tesoro refinery in Anacortes, Washington, on April 2, 2010, and never drove back out. They perished when a decades-old, [structurally deficient piece of equipment called a heat exchanger](https://www.csb.gov/csb-investigation-finds-2010-tesoro-refinery-fatal-explosion-resulted-from-high-temperature-hydrogen-attack-damage-to-heat-exchanger/) exploded and caught fire in [one of the worst industrial incidents](https://www.npr.org/2014/08/13/340153423/years-after-tragedy-tesoro-ducks-penalties-for-refinery-deaths) in state history.

Campbell and other members of USW Local 12-591 pay tribute to the seven with a laser focus on safety at the refinery, currently owned by Marathon.

But now they’re seizing the chance to go even further and spare workers at other refineries the kind of loss that weighs so heavily on them. Campbell, president of Local 12-591, is helping to lead the union’s push for [stronger rules](https://www.lni.wa.gov/news-events/article/23-11) aimed at revolutionizing the safety culture at all five refineries in the state.

The proposed improvements, modeled on the [industry-leading advances](https://www.dir.ca.gov/DIRNews/2017/2017-37.pdf) that the USW pushed California to enact in 2017, represent the first comprehensive, statewide enhancements to “process safety management” (PSM) at Washington’s refineries in nearly 30 years. PSM refers to how workers and management use planning, training, and equipment to reduce risk and respond to incidents.

“Improving process safety is something that we always want to keep working on,” explained Campbell, who will testify during [upcoming public hearings](https://www.lni.wa.gov/rulemaking-activity/?query=296-67&cardNo=AO17-20&ruleTopic=Safety%20%26%20Health) on the proposed rules overhaul. “It’s not something we ever think is finished. We’re always learning, and technology is always changing.”

“We don’t want to go backward. We don’t want to get complacent,” emphasized Campbell, noting that oil companies increasingly attempt to “exploit the loopholes” in the current, outdated rules despite the deadly warnings provided by the Tesoro incident and other tragedies.

For example, Campbell said, refineries sometimes have one management representative resolve a safety concern when the safer, prudent course would be to assemble a team of experts from engineering, production, and other disciplines to work through the issue.

The new PSM rules—also championed by community residents and other advocates fighting alongside the USW—would force employers to toe the line and hold management accountable. Among many other provisions, they’d require refineries to ensure the structural and mechanical [integrity of equipment](https://www.lni.wa.gov/rulemaking-activity/AO17-20/1720Proposal.pdf), make prompt repairs and give workers the authority to suspend operations when they identify hazards.

Lessons learned from the Tesoro disaster are driving those changes.

After the tragedy there, investigators denounced the company’s lax safety culture. They found that the refinery “normalized” hazardous conditions, including leaks from heat exchangers, and failed to take corrective action.

Instead, Tesoro looked the other way. On the day of the disaster, bosses assigned seven workers to the heat exchanger—[far more than otherwise needed for the procedure underway there at the time](https://www.csb.gov/videos/behind-the-curve/)—to handle leaks that the refinery failed to address through maintenance.

Besides requiring refineries to fix obvious problems, the new PSM rules place a heightened focus on proactively identifying issues and addressing them before they put lives at risk. Before installing a bigger pump, for example, a facility would have to assess the environmental impact, evaluate the refinery’s fire suppression system and ensure the capacity of the piping system, among other issues.

Just as important, the proposed rules mandate extensive worker involvement not only in hazard analysis and emergency preparedness but in responding to incidents and conducting the comprehensive “root cause” investigations that take place afterward.

“We are the experts on the equipment. We live here, 24/7,” Campbell said, referring to the rotating crews of USW members who operate the refinery around the clock. “We know when something’s being ignored. We know when corners are being cut. We need help from our state officials to enforce the behaviors we know to be safest.”

The same commitment to a path forward prompted USW members in California to successfully push for an overhaul of their state’s PSM rules after a 2012 fire at a Chevron refinery [sent 15,000 people to hospitals](https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/federal-report-blame-chevrons-poor-safety-protocols-for-2012-refinery-fire-that-sent-15000-neighbors-to-the-hospital/) with breathing problems.

In the wake of that disaster, investigators determined that the company repeatedly ignored warnings about corroded piping. One of those compromised pipes eventually ruptured and released flammable material, sparking the fire.

“It was a known problem, and it wasn’t addressed. They saved some money. That was the action they took,” Norman Rogers, second vice president of USW Local 675, said of Chevron management.

Members of Local 675 and oil workers from other USW locals across California collaborated with a broad-based community coalition in pushing through the stronger rules, which expanded worker participation in refinery operations and safety.

Rogers said workers previously felt as though they were “sitting on the bench in the dugout watching the game. Now, we are getting into the batter’s box.”

Washington officials describe California’s rules as “the [most protective](https://www.lni.wa.gov/news-events/article/23-11) in the country,” and that is why Campbell and other advocates used them as a template for the improvements they’re determined to make.

The USW’s oil workers continually strive to negotiate safety improvements in collective bargaining agreements.

But stronger PSM rules at the state level bring sweeping improvements to workers at many refineries all at once. They also provide consistency and uniformity to the industry. And they offer stability to workers and communities when refineries change hands, as they often do.

“This is the ace up our sleeve,” explained Rogers, who will travel to Washington later this month to testify about his experiences with PSM in California.

“Companies will come and go. Operating philosophies and safety philosophies will change. The only thing we have to hold onto are the regulations. That they’re strong and give us a voice are crucial.”