

Exclusive: U.S. orders foreign firms to further cut down on oil trades with Venezuela

LONDON (Reuters) - The United States has instructed oil trading houses and refiners around the world to further cut dealings with Venezuela or face sanctions themselves, even if the trades are not prohibited by published U.S. sanctions, three sources familiar with the matter said. The move comes as Washington's efforts to oust President Nicolas Maduro in favor of opposition leader Juan Guaido have stalled, and is further evidence of how it is leaning on non-U.S. firms to achieve its foreign policy goals.

The U.S. imposed fresh sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry earlier this year but some companies have continued to supply the country with fuel from India, Russia and Europe. Washington is particularly keen to end deliveries of gasoline and refined products used to dilute Venezuela's heavy crude oil to make it suitable for export. Jet fuel and diesel would be exempt for humanitarian reasons, the sources said. The U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced a ban in early February on the use of its financial system in oil deals with Venezuela after April.

But as recently as this week, the U.S. State department has called up foreign firms to say that the scope of the sanctions is wider. The sources said that the State Department made clear that any kind of oil trade, whether it be direct, indirect or barter, would be considered a breach. OFAC did not immediately respond to requests for comment. A spokesman for the State Department said "we continue to engage with companies in the energy sector on the possible risks they face by conducting business with PDVSA." "This is how the United States operates these days. They have written rules and then they call you to explain that there are also unwritten

rules that they want you to follow," one of the sources said. Washington has been using its oil clout more and more. At a major oil event in Houston this month, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a rare appearance and laid out a vision of working with energy firms to isolate Iran and Venezuela.

Venezuela's overall exports of crude and fuel dropped to 920,000 barrels a day in the first month of sanctions from more than 1.5 million bpd in the prior three months, according to Refinitiv Eikon and state firm PDVSA data.

Russia, however, remains a staunch supporter of Maduro's government which has plunged Venezuela into an economic and humanitarian crisis.

In an escalation of tensions, U.S. President Donald Trump called on Moscow to remove all its soldiers from Venezuela after a Russian military contingent arrived just outside of Caracas, saying "all options" were open to make that happen.



FILE PHOTO: Isla Oil Refinery PDVSA terminal is seen in Willemstad on the island of Curacao



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Editor's Choice



Rudy Meredith, the former head soccer coach at Yale University facing charges in a nationwide college admissions cheating scheme, leaves the federal courthouse in Boston, Massachusetts, U.S., March 28, 2019. REUTERS/Katherine Taylor



U.S. President Trump departs on travel to Michigan from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland



Police officers escort David Romero, journalist and director of opposition broadcaster Radio Globo, after he was detained on charges of defamation and libel at the premises of the radio station, in Tegucigalpa



A woman walking in front of the oldest hospital in Costa Rica, San Juan de Dios Hospital, in San Jose



Researchers and assistants from the Amazonian Aquatic Mammals Project remove Amazonian manatees from a lake on the bank of the Solimoes river, before they are reintroduced in the nature, in Manacapuru



Mar 28, 2019; Arlington, TX, USA; Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon (70) answers questions from the media in the dugout prior to the opening day game against Texas Rangers at Globe Life Park in Arlington. Mandatory Credit: Ray Carlin-USA TODAY Sports



FILE PHOTO: U.S. President Trump meets with Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu at the White House in Washington



Brazil's Infrastructure Minister Tarcisio Gomes de Freitas and members of Rumo consortium celebrate winning the auction for a part of Norte-Sul railroad at Brazil's BM&F Bovespa Stock Exchange in Sao Paulo

**Hundreds Laid Off or Reassigned
As Cypress Fairbanks Med Center Converts
To Free-Standing ER**

Nearly 600 employees learned last week they would be laid off at Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center on the heels of its parent company's decision to convert the full-service hospital into a free-standing emergency room, according to state documents and hospital officials.

The unusual conversion comes when the free-standing emergency industry in Texas is under increased scrutiny by lawmakers because of high prices, patient confusion about insurance coverage and the potential for unexpected medical bills. Health policy experts Wednesday said they were concerned about the shift from hospital to free-standing emergency center.

"I've never heard of anything like it," said Vivian Ho, a health economist at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center, 181-bed hospital serving the north Houston suburbs, was acquired less than two years ago by HCA, a for-profit health system headquartered in Nashville, Tenn. HCA decided to now convert it as part of a larger reshuffling of facilities, company officials said.



The conversion is expected to be complete by April 18. HCA has yet to finalize a name for the emergency center.

300 Offered Jobs

HCA notified the Texas Workforce Commission that it would lay off 586 workers beginning May 17. Efforts, however, are under way to offer those employees similar positions within its health care system, Burnett said in a statement.

About 300 affected employees have accepted or been offered jobs and some will remain at the new emergency room, HCA officials said. The remainder are still in the recruitment process or have chosen to leave, the company said.

HCA has made an aggressive push into the Houston market, recently becoming the area's largest health system. It already has a dominant footprint in the northwest Houston area where it owns three other



Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center will become a freestanding emergency room.

Photo: Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

hospitals and six stand-alone emergency departments, the company said.



In total, HCA Houston Healthcare owns 15 hospitals, nine outpatient surgery cen-

ters, eight freestanding emergency centers and a dozen freestanding diagnostic imaging facilities in Greater Houston, according to the company.

The switch to a free-standing emergency room comes at a time of great change in the nation as health care systems shift away from traditional in-patient services to outpatient centers, retail locations, and telemedicine to find more affordable ways to treat patients.

Still, Ho, the health care economist, is puzzled by this particular conversion plan since emergency rooms are often the most expensive treatment venue, especially for minor conditions. (Courtesy chron.com)

Related

HCA Healthcare Adds Four Hospitals To Expanding Network



Joyce Heckmann works in the Newborn Nursery at Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center, which has been bought by HCA Healthcare. (Photo/Houston Chronicle) HCA Healthcare's Gulf Coast Division

continues its growth on Houston's north side as it completes the purchase of three acute care hospitals and one long-term care hospital, officials with the regional network announced.

The acquisition of the four facilities comes on the heels of the purchase of Tomball Regional Medical Center, with more potentially on the way, a company statement said.

Acquisition of Tomball hospital now complete

"These acquisitions represent a very purposeful commitments to filling what we see as a gap in community health care excellence in Houston," said Troy Villarreal, president of HCA Gulf Coast Division, in a statement.

The most recent acquisitions are Houston Northwest Medical Center, Cypress Fairbanks Medical Center, Park Plaza Hospital and Plaza Specialty Hospital.

HCA Gulf Coast Division is a regional network of facilities that includes 18 hospitals, nine ambulatory surgical centers, 10 free standing emergency centers and a regional transfer center.



The integration of Tomball Regional Medical into HCA Healthcare Gulf Coast Division's growing network in the Houston area is now complete, the company announced Wednesday.

The acquisition of the 350-bed facility in Tomball was announced last year and brings the number of hospitals in HCA Gulf Coast Division's health care network to 14.

"For more than 40 years Tomball Regional Medical Center physicians and staff have been delivering high-quality care to this community. We are pleased to welcome them into the HCA Gulf Coast Division family," said Troy Villarreal, HCA Gulf Coast Division president, in a statement. The hospital will continue operating under the name Tomball Regional Medical Center. (Courtesy chron.com)

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The Fourth Industrial Revolution

**Robots, Drones And Sensors
Are Changing The Way We Farm**

**The Future Of Farming Is Here -
High-Tech Brings Agriculture
Into The 21st Century**



Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Last spring, farmer Brian Tischler was sitting in his tractor when he had an idea. What if his tractor was fully autonomous? Thanks to AgOpenGPS – a software he developed that tracks where crops are seeded – he’s had more time to think of new ideas to improve his workflow. Tischler began creating on the spot, envisioning features for the autonomous tractor like remote control via smartphone, the ability to sense obstacles, and geolocation to ensure the tractor stays within a field. Across the farming industry, tech innovations like Tischler’s are revolutioniz-

ing the way agriculture is done. These applications come at a critical time. The world population is expected to swell to 9.8 billion by 2050. Climate change and infectious disease are looming threats to livestock production and crop yield. Tischler made the tractor program open source, sharing it online so farmers from across the globe can download and develop additions. Tischler, who recently won the 2018 ASTech Award for Outstanding Achievement in Agricultural Innovation, views the software as a way of giving back to the farming community. A lot of

leading-edge technology is not affordable for smaller operations.



“What inspires me is connecting with other people who share how they’re using [the software],” says Tischler.

Such innovations have made the \$3 trillion industry more efficient, resourceful, and productive. In recent years, there have been varied applications of agriculture technology: crop-watering drones, software that uses satellites to manage nut and citrus orchards, virtual trials of new farming techniques, genomics testing that can ward off food contamination, and more. **Recent innovations have made the \$3 trillion farming industry more efficient, resourceful and productive.**

The DJI “Agricultural Wonder Drone” makes it possible for a single farmer to feed or spray pesticide on as much as 80 acres of crops a day. By comparison, a worker on foot may cover less than one acre in the same amount of time. Using the DJI drone, the farmer maps out the field by walking through it and the unit’s controller creates a flight path, almost like a flying Roomba.

In Canada, the R2B2 team of scientists are researching rural connectivity and precision agriculture. Their studies utilize digital devices, applications, and databases of geospatial techniques to analyze and respond to variability in the field.

R2B2 looks at how wireless optimization and tools like sensors and drones support sustainable farming practices. For example, by using sensors to measure moisture and nutrients in the soil, farmers avoid loading up fields with excess irrigation and pesticides, saving money and protecting the environment.



Using linked technologies, a connected farm can also employ solar wireless devices like Ecorobotix, a solar-powered weeding robot. Dr. Helen Hambly, R2B2’s lead scientist explains, “In the next generation of farming, there is a lot of monitoring done through connected and wireless devices. Wireless has changed things substantially.”

These innovations come at a critical time, as the world population is expected to swell and climate change and infectious

disease are looming threats to livestock production and crop yield.

Many farmers have adopted precision agriculture practices. Christian Gastón Palmaz, CEO of Napa’s Palmaz Vineyards, created VIGOMany farmers have adopted precision agriculture practices. Christian Gastón Palmaz, CEO of Napa’s Palmaz Vineyards, created VIGOR (Vineyard Infrared Growth Optical Recognition), smart software that marries infrared imagery with soil moisture measurements. The algorithmic approach ensures that the vines grow at the same rate and that the exact amount of water needed is used—reducing water use by an estimated 20 percent.

Palmaz says, “Big data analytics has had a profound impact on understanding and addressing slight amounts of difference, which would otherwise propagate over time.”



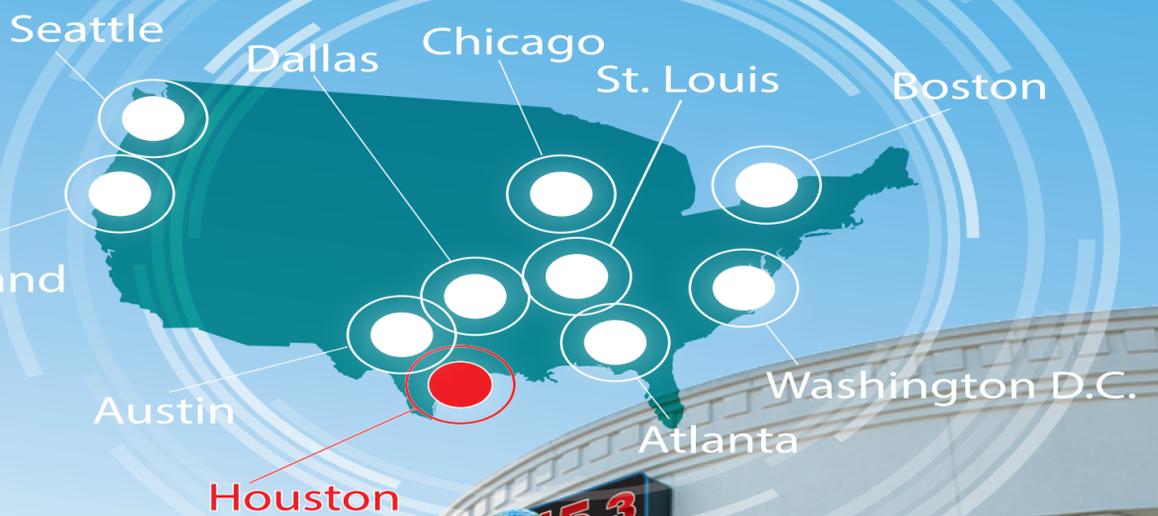
Technology can also help manage livestock wellness and reproduction. Remote Insights developed ear tags that monitor sows’ behavior, movements, eating and drinking. The data is collected and analyzed to check that the animal has a healthy appetite and normal mobility. Moocall created monitors to check when a female cow is in heat and a pregnant one is ready to give birth. Such forward-thinking equipment can save a farmer numerous trips to the field or barn to review the herd. There’s palpable excitement within the field about the myriad of technological possibilities, strengthening old farming traditions, by using technology to answer existing needs. As Hambly says, “This is the farming of the future.” (Courtesy <https://www.verizon.com>)



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