

Paramount residents not alone in pollution fight

A Paramount case spotlights poor communities' struggle for action on local pollution sources.

By Tony Barboza and Jessica Garrison
February 15, 2014, 11:18 a.m.



Soon after starting work at Lincoln Elementary in Paramount nearly five years ago, second-grade teacher Lisa Lappin became alarmed by the number of teachers and students sick from cancer and other illnesses.

Pungent, metallic odors sometimes blanketed the school, so Lappin started asking questions. She complained to county and environmental regulators, circulated petitions and sought help from environmental groups.

Last month, residents of this working-class city of 54,000 got answers from the South Coast Air Quality Management District. Carlton Forge Works, a metal manufacturing facility a few blocks from the school, had been releasing toxic metals into the air, including hexavalent chromium and cadmium. More concerning were high levels of nickel, a carcinogen that can harm lungs and cause asthma and bronchitis.

Air district officials had launched an investigation last year soon after getting complaints and tested the air at the school and two other downwind sites. The district says levels of toxic metals they found are probably high enough to require a health study of whether the facility is putting the neighborhood at a higher risk of cancer. The agency has ordered the company to submit an inventory of its emissions.

Lappin and other activists in the southeast Los Angeles County city say they welcome regulators' attention but believe all environmental agencies should have moved more quickly and in a more coordinated fashion to address toxic emissions. "It shouldn't take so long for action to be taken," Lappin said.

Two other Los Angeles County communities have raised similar criticisms in recent months.

Elected leaders and activists mounted a campaign against Exide Technologies, a battery recycler in Vernon, after an air district report that arsenic emissions from the plant were posing a danger to 110,000 people. Officials have since moved to regulate the company more rigorously.

In South Los Angeles, after residents complained for four years to local and state agencies about headaches, respiratory illnesses and nosebleeds, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency accused an oil field operator of threatening the health of neighbors by failing to maintain safe emissions. Allenco Energy Inc. has voluntarily shut down, at least temporarily.

Activists say the actions were long overdue.

"We desperately need the various environmental and public health agencies to coordinate to address the fact that residents, including children, are sick because they live and go to school in the midst of dozens of toxic facilities," said Maya Golden-Krasner, an attorney for the advocacy group Communities for a Better Environment.

"Doing a whack-a-mole by looking at one facility at a time isn't actually accomplishing a lot," Golden-Krasner said.

The cases illustrate a challenge facing pollution regulators in California: Even as air quality has improved across the state, pockets of pollution remain, often in lower income neighborhoods where homes and industry sit side by side.

"You still have situations where manufacturing operations have very localized impacts on the neighbors, even though their overall contribution to the region is relatively small," said Rachel Morello-Frosch, a professor of public health at UC Berkeley.

Morello-Frosch is among many specialists on environmental inequality who have published studies showing that non-white, low-income communities across the nation bear a disproportionate burden of industrial pollution. Residents in many of those communities have complained for years without seeing any improvement.

In Paramount, Carlton Forge Works has been part of the community since 1929. It was acquired in 2009 as a subsidiary of Precision Castparts Corp., based in Portland, Ore., and now manufactures metal rings for the aerospace industry and gas turbine engines. Reports to the air district show that the facility's nickel emissions rose in 2011 and 2012.

In all, more than 35,000 people live within a mile of the facility, 79% of them Latino and 12% black, according to data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the 2010 census. More than half live below the poverty line.

The company said it has not increased production in recent years and that the rise in nickel emissions it reported reflects more refined calculations and "normal variations in product mix and handling."

Vice President Kevin Dahlin said that when contacted by air quality officials, the company took immediate steps to reduce emissions. As a result, nickel emissions have fallen, the air district said.

Dahlin said he would work with regulators to cut emissions even more. "Carlton's top priority is safety, both of our employees and the community," Dahlin said. About 40% of Carlton's 365 workers live near the plant, he said.

But some residents say the odors have continued.

Ericka Martinez, a data entry worker and 20-year resident who lives a few blocks from the plant, said she sought help from the city of Paramount. Martinez said she and her neighbors did not know which agency to contact, so they started filing online complaints with the city two years ago about an odor she likened to someone lighting a match under your nose.

Since then, the odors have lessened at times, only to return a few weeks later, including on nights and weekends, she said. "It's not every day, but it's a problem that has not stopped."

Paramount City Manager Linda Benedetti-Leal said the city never received complaints about the odors.

Lappin's initial worries about foul air at the school were referred to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Proving a direct link between a particular source of pollution and illnesses in a community is very difficult — and county health officials found no evidence of a cancer cluster in Paramount.

In 2012, Lappin turned to the air quality management district, which said it had received 64 complaints about Carlton over the last two years, three-quarters of them from Lappin.

Records show that the district had cited Carlton for violations six times over the last two decades, including for emitting excessive nitrogen oxides — smog-forming gases that can cause respiratory problems. In 2012 the facility was cited for failure to submit an annual report on its emissions.

Sam Atwood, spokesman for the air district, said his agency's response was "immediate and aggressive" once the recent complaints made their way to his agency. "In very short order, we not only had inspectors on the ground, but we also started to do air sampling," he said.

Last month the air district held a community meeting at which officials revealed that the odors were cause for concern. Air quality officials also told residents they have no specific rules

governing metal grinding at Carlton and more than a dozen other similar operations in the region.

The district has begun drafting regulations that would regulate day-to-day operations at metal forging, shredding, grinding and processing facilities to better protect people who live, work and attend school nearby.

Angelo Bellomo, environmental health director for the county health department, said he remains concerned about the location of the school, even if his agency found no evidence of a cancer cluster.

"In addition to that one facility, there are many sources of emissions in that area, and the cumulative risk presented by these sources cannot be ruled out as contributing to illness in the community," Bellomo said.

"We are looking at other similar situations throughout the county where facilities may be in regulatory compliance, but where we nevertheless find there is a public health impact."

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