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Frustrated Neighbors Want Faster Action Over L.A. Battery Recycling Plant



Roberto Cabrales of Communities for a Better Environment regularly includes the Exide Technologies plant in Vernon in the activist group's "toxic tour" of pollution sites to the east and south of Los Angeles. (Chris Richard)

By Chris Richard

Like most 6-year-olds, Claudia Gomez's son, Stanley, loves to play in the dirt, and he doesn't much like washing his hands. But these days more than ever, Gomez is a stickler for cleanliness.

On Sunday evening, she spotted the grime as Stanley raced past her on his way to play outside.

Exide plant may have showered its neighbors with lead dust for decades.

"I already washed my hands!" Stanley complained.

The protest didn't work. Gomez hauled Stanley to the sink and started scrubbing.

Gomez is being so careful because the state Department of Toxic Substances Control has warned parents not to let their children play in the dirt. The department is urging frequent hand-washing as a **precaution against lead poisoning**.

People in Gomez's Boyle Heights neighborhood and in Maywood, just east of downtown Los Angeles, **got new warnings** earlier this month that a battery recycling plant may have contaminated their houses and yards with lead.

State regulators believe the Exide Technologies battery recycling plant may have showered its neighbors with lead dust for decades.

Lead poisoning can attack every organ in the body. In children, it can cause brain damage.

Exide crushes and melts about 25,000 car batteries a day. The company **has been cited repeatedly for letting lead and arsenic leak** into residential neighborhoods less than 2 miles away.

Last fall, the Department of Toxic Substances Control ordered soil testing at **39 houses and two schools** near the Exide plant.

Officials announced recently that all **the samples exceeded 80 parts per million**, the level at which the state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment recommends additional evaluation. The samples at one home topped 580 parts per million.

Brian Johnson, deputy director at the Department of Toxic Substances Control, says eventually, Exide might be ordered to cover the contaminated areas with mulch or sod, or possibly haul away some dirt. But first, Johnson says regulators need to map the poison.

“We don’t know (what the strategy will be) yet, because we don’t know how extensive these concentrations are. So, we don’t feel that it’s an emergency, but it does concern us significantly and that’s why we have them moving quickly,” Johnson said.

Exide has until today to come up with that broader testing plan — and a strategy to protect people known to have been exposed to lead.

Some Neighbors Say State Action is Too Little, Too Late

But some neighborhood residents are losing faith in a regulatory response they feel is too little, too late.

At a neighborhood playground, Alejandro Ramirez wondered how he’s supposed to keep his nephew safe.

“I can’t tell him, ‘Don’t grab this, don’t grab that,’ because he’s a little boy, and what he wants is to experiment and to play in the dirt, or in games,” Ramirez said in Spanish.

Liza Tucker of the nonprofit activist group Consumer Watchdog called the request for additional testing “totally passing the buck.”

“What I’m concerned about is chronic exposure to lead. Those kids breathe the air. Those adults breathe the air. Lead is a neurotoxin. This has been going on now for years,” Tucker said.

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For its part, Exide says it now meets clean air standards. Plant Manager John Hogarth called the company “part of the green economy.” Exide already helps the environment by recycling some 8 million car batteries a year, Hogarth said, adding that otherwise the batteries would end up in landfills.

“What I can say to the community is that we are working very closely with the agencies that regulate us for health and environmental purposes, and we are committed to meet those requirements, whatever they are,” he said.

He added that Exide supports its community by providing more than 100 union jobs.

“My first priority is their health and hygiene and also the health and, you know, being a good steward of the environment for the communities around us.”

History of Violations

State records tell a different story. The plant has operated under an **interim permit since December 1981**. In all that time, Exide hasn't satisfied regulators that it has fully met California's rules for the safe operation of such toxic sites. In fact, regulators twice issued deficiency notices that could have allowed the state to close the plant.

Instead, the state allowed it to stay open

Brian Johnson, of the Department of Toxic Substances Control, says it wasn't always clear how lead smelters like Exide fit into the regulatory structure. Also, the plant filed several different permit applications. And time dragged on.

“We do not have that patience any longer,” Johnson said. “We are directing Exide to do the work that should have been done years ago and to do it quickly, and we are moving forward down that path.”

On Tuesday, Johnson held a community meeting at a church about 2 miles from Exide.

East Los Angeles resident Rafael Yanez, an environmental engineer, pointed out that so far, state regulators have sampled the middle of people's yards, away from places where rain might concentrate lead, like under rain spouts. State officials are trying to get the average concentrations at first, not the peaks.

But Yanez said many families in the neighborhood plant kitchen gardens near downspouts.

“Since this is a Latin community, you would see chiles, things like yerba buena or other medicinal herbs that they'll boil as teas to give to their children that are colicky,” he said.

Yanez thinks the lead concentrations in those gardens could be up to six times higher. He urged state regulators to require testing in other places that might have accumulated lead over the years, such as storm drains.

Johnson said that regulators put Exide on a tight schedule to come up with the protection and testing plan and he promised rapid action. Meanwhile, the county Department of Public Health will start offering free blood tests for people who want to be screened for lead.

Roberto Cabrales of **Communities for a Better Environment** hopes regulators do crack down. He regularly swings by Exide on the organization's “toxic tour” of pollution hot spots to the east and south of Los Angeles. “But it's not the only one,” he said.

Last week Los Angeles County supervisors voted to set up a task force to identify chronic polluters like Exide and get them cleaned up or closed

Claudia Gomez, the mom who can't stop scrubbing her son's hands, is also growing weary of a struggle that seems to bring so little result.

"Sure, we should fight it, and they need to close that thing down and put it somewhere else. But everybody's sick and stuff like that."

Gomez says her 9-year-old daughter has frequent headaches, and she wonders whether that could be a symptom of lead poisoning. Her 7-month old baby is sickly, too. It's all getting to be too much, and she says she's thinking of moving away before things get worse.