

Exide records excess lead emissions, despite cutbacks

The battery recycler will meet with air quality officials to discuss additional action to curb emissions. The company says it is now in compliance with regulations.

By Jessica Garrison and Kim Christensen

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Even after being forced to cut production last month because of high lead emissions, a Vernon battery recycler has continued to violate limits on releases of the potent neurotoxin, regulators said Wednesday.

A monitor on the north side of Exide Technologies' sprawling plant near the Los Angeles River registered emissions in violation of the South

Coast Air Quality Management District's requirements for airborne lead Sept. 18, air district Executive Officer Barry Wallerstein said.

That came on the heels of another violation of lead standards in early September that prompted the air district to order the company to cut production by 15%, which it did Sept. 14. Days before, state and county officials had announced an unprecedented plan to offer Exide-funded blood tests for lead to about a quarter of a million people who might have been affected by emissions.

The problems with lead come as elected officials and community members across southeast Los Angeles County have been calling for the plant's closure amid an outcry over high emissions of potentially dangerous toxins. Exide, one of the world's largest recyclers of lead-acid batteries, has run the plant since 2000.

In March, the air district found that elevated arsenic emissions from the plant had increased the cancer risk for more than 110,000 people.

"You're probably wondering what the heck is going on, and what are we going to do about it," Wallerstein said of the latest violations. "At least that's what I'd be wondering."

He said air regulators plan to meet with Exide officials in the next few days to "discuss additional actions that we will ask them to take to help further control lead emissions from their facility."

Exide is investigating the cause of the latest elevated lead emissions Sept. 18 and whether they were the result of excavation work to repair a water pipe break on a neighboring site not owned by the battery recycler, said Sallie Hofmeister, a company spokeswoman.

"Exide immediately reported the water pipe repair cleanup and the monitor reading to regulators and continues to curtail production by 15% as required by air district rules," she said. "Exide is now in compliance with the regulatory emissions standard."

Air district officials said they do not believe the excavation work on the nearby property caused the elevated emissions. But officials did say repair work on a degraded wastewater pipe on Exide's property could be a factor because the digging might have stirred up lead dust.

Officials with the state Department of Toxic Substances Control, the agency overseeing the wastewater pipe work, said they had asked Exide to adopt additional dust control measures, including misters and monitoring equipment.

Bell City Councilman Nestor Valencia said "it boggles the mind" that the Vernon plant has continued to emit unacceptable levels of lead and, before that, arsenic.

"I can't imagine the damage it has done to the community over the years, " he said.

Frank Villalobos of East Los Angeles, a member of a church group that is concerned about the facility, said the company has "no regard for the community. All they want to do is make money."

Wallerstein emphasized that he doesn't "want people overreacting" to the latest lead violation, noting that the air district's rules are stricter than federal ones and that the facility has remained in compliance with federal standards for lead. Under the air district's rules, Exide's lead emissions cannot cause the outdoor air concentration of lead to exceed 0.15 micrograms per cubic meter based on a 30-day average

Still, he said that air officials are taking notice of "a mounting record of the facility's inability to comply with regulations on an ongoing basis. We are taking every step we can to bring them into compliance." Those steps, he said, include "immediate additional controls" as well as "new regulatory requirements that they will have to meet over the long term."

The air district is seeking to adopt controls on arsenic emissions that are specific to lead-acid battery recyclers such as Exide.

Environmental activists are not satisfied.

"I think everyone can say that the agencies don't know how to regulate this facility," said Yana Garcia, a lawyer for Communities for a Better Environment, an environmental justice group based in Huntington Park. She noted that her organization warned last month, the last time Exide violated lead rules, that the 15% curb in production ordered by the AQMD was not going to be enough.

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