

Angry residents confront state officials over Exide plant

Neighbors of the Vernon battery recycler urge the state to shut it down after the discovery of high lead levels in nearby homes.

By Jessica Garrison
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Exide Plant Under Fire Again Over Health Hazards

Furious residents confronted state officials at a community meeting Wednesday night to discuss the high levels of lead found in the backyards of homes near a Vernon battery recycling plant.

"We've been hearing the same junk over and over and over," said Robert Cabrales, an organizer with the environmental justice group Communities for a Better Environment. "When are we going to see cleanup in our communities?"

The meeting came one week after state officials announced that soil testing had revealed elevated levels of lead in the soil at homes and a park north and south of the Exide Technologies plant.

Officials with the State Department of Toxic Substances Control issued health warnings, telling people not to let children play in bare soil or eat leafy green vegetables grown in it. They also ordered additional testing of more homes, and told Exide to come up with a plan to protect small children and pregnant women living in places with elevated lead levels. Exide must file that plan with the state by Friday.

Initially, consultants working for Exide tested 19 homes in Boyle Heights and 20 in Maywood. Almost every home had levels of lead in the soil that exceeded 80 parts per million, the level at which California recommends further health-related evaluations. One home had samples above 580 parts per million.

State officials emphasized that those levels do not pose an acute risk for adults.

Exide officials released a statement Wednesday, in which they said they are committed to the community's health and "working tirelessly with regulators."

But the statement also noted that "there are numerous sources [of lead] in the heavily industrial corridor surrounding the Exide facility ... which could contribute to higher levels of lead in soil." Among them, Exide said, are freeway exhaust and lead paint in older homes.

Officials' attempts to reassure residents that they are not in immediate danger were not well received by some at the meeting, nor was the suggestion that Exide might not be responsible.

Many residents implored regulators to shut the plant down, and some castigated them for not doing so already.

Terry Cano said that in her family, people have "passed away, are sick, have asthma.... When I hear you say it's not an emergency, I beg to differ."

Teresa Solario, 59, of Maywood added: "Don't come here to tell us lies. You're telling us to wash the children's hands, and that's enough?"

Exide has been the focus of intense attention from elected leaders, residents and officials since the South Coast Air Quality Management District found last year that arsenic emissions from the plant posed an elevated cancer risk to 110,000 people living nearby.

The plant has also been cited several times in recent years, often for exceeding permissible levels of lead.

The air district is now seeking to halt lead smelting operations at Exide until its air pollution systems are improved; Exide officials argue the plant should be allowed to stay open and that emissions have plummeted in recent months. A hearing board for the agency is taking testimony on the question.

Soil testing did not turn up any elevated levels of arsenic.

B. Timberlake, 68, of Bell had a simple question for regulators: "Why has it taken so many years to do soil testing for lead in people's homes?"

Brian Johnson, deputy director in charge of enforcement for toxic substances control, paused before answering. "I wish I could change the past, but I cannot." He added that a new administration is committed to making sure the community is protected.

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