NEWS • News

Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic hit with state violation for dumping leachate

Citizens reported the operators took potentially toxic leachate offsite, leading into Santa Clara River

The Chiquita Canyon Landfill, just west of the city of Santa Clarita on Thursday, March 21,2024. (Photo by Dean Musgrove, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

By STEVE SCAUZILLO | sscauzillo@scng.com | Daily News
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The troubled Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic received a new violation last week from a state water agency for pumping untreated leachate water from the landfill into local waterways that empty into the Santa Clara River.

A violation letter dated April 9 was sent to the landfill operators by the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, raising concerns that the landfill's wastewater may reach groundwater sources fed by the river and used for drinking water. The next day, Stephen Cole, assistant general manager of the Santa Clarita Valley Water Agency, sent a letter to the water control board expressing concerns about "potential groundwater impacts due to current conditions at the Chiquita Canyon Landfill."

The Santa Clarita Valley Water Agency maintains drinking water supply wells within 3,000 feet of the landfill, according to the letter.

About a month earlier, the same water agency denied the landfill a permit to expand trash operations, saying the leachate had previously been tested for toxic amounts of benzene, a human carcinogen. Because of the toxic leachate flowing from the municipal landfill, the regional water board said any expansion was denied until the agency was satisfied that nearby underground drinking water sources were protected.

"These raise pretty serious concerns about what is going in the water," said Oshea Orchid, an attorney who filed a lawsuit asking the court to close the facility. The case was filed on behalf of dozens of residents living in Val Verde, Hasley Canyon, Castaic and Live Oak — near the 639-acre landfill in the Santa Clarita Valley — who have reported asthma attacks, bloody noses, skin irritations, nausea and heart palpitations to authorities for more a year and blamed their health issues on noxious odors from the landfill.

Orchid said the landfill is producing up to 200,000 gallons of leachate a day that has been pumped into waterways or kept in storage tanks onsite. State regulatory authorities concluded the leachate is the result of a very hot smoldering event caused by an out-of-control reaction in an older, inactive section of the landfill.

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Notices on a community board in the town of Val Verde is west of the Chiquita Canyon Landfill on Thursday, March 21,2024. (Photo by Dean Musgrove, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

Over the last several months, landfill operators have been ordered to install more leachate controls, add more flares to burn off more toxic liquids and gases, and add more monitoring wells. According to the violation notice, the operators were caught by a citizens' group on several occasions pumping out the leachate and unloading leachate from a truck into the waterways, which led to the waste reaching the river.

"You can't just pump pollutants into a stream," said Lynne Plambeck, president of Santa Clarita Organization for Planning and the Environment or SCOPE on Monday, April 15. Plambeck has been following the landfill issues for more than 10 years.

"The notice of violation shows the landfill operators don't have the best practices," Plambeck said. She said permits are needed to pump wastewater into a river or its tributary. It's possible the contaminated leachate could affect water sources downstream, in Piru and Sylmar, she said.

Chiquita Canyon Landfill officials, and Steve Cassulo, the landfill manager who was one of three officials with the landfill to receive the regional water board's notice of violation (NOV), also did not respond to emailed questions from this newspaper on Monday.

The water board said the landfill was not authorized to pump landfill leachate out of the landfill into a waterway, a violation of the Industrial General Permit. Cassulo responded in the violation notice that the landfill was authorized to "conduct storm water discharges to provide further control over settling time." But the water board said flatly that was a violation of the landfill's permit and not allowed.

A citizens' group sent videos on March 11, 2024 to the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) of a pump releasing "untreated water into the Santa Clara River." The complaint said the pumping took place on several different occasions, but always late on Friday nights.

A second complaint was sent on March 12 saying the "Chiquita Canyon Landfill has been discharging leachate ponds into the local waterway." The water board staff notified Cassulo on March 11 and March 13 telling the landfill officials to stop the practice and to remove the pumping equipment that was mounted atop the south detention basin spillway at the landfill.

On March 14, Cassulo sent a photo showing the pump had been removed from the spillway structure, the water board reported.

On March 16, CalEPA received a complaint saying the storm water and possible leachate was pumped offsite from a vacuum truck that discharged the liquids on the other side of the south detention basin spillway, which flows into the Santa Clara River, according to the violation notice.

The landfill operators have been given until May 9 to comply with the order and take corrective action. The operators could be assessed fines of up to $10,000 per day for each violation. The water board also has the option of referring the matter to the California state Attorney General's Office for enforcement.

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