NEWS - News

Chiquita Canyon's neighbors petition court for closure, decry Castaic landfill's odors

The complaint also claims L.A. County is ignoring permit violations and is breaking environmental justice laws

People hold signs during a news conference at Hasley Canyon Park in Castaic to announce the Citizens for Chiquita Canyon Closure filing a writ against the County to call for the immediate closure of the landfill, and mitigation of impacts on the community on Thursday, Feb. 22, 2024. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

By STEVE SCAUZILLO | scauzillo@scng.com | Daily News
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A group of residents near Castaic filed a lawsuit on Thursday, Feb. 23, demanding that Los Angeles County permanently close the Chiquita Canyon Landfill due to a continuous release of toxic odors for nearly a year that is making them sick.

The writ of mandate, filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court in downtown Los Angeles, claims the county is not following state environmental laws and that the landfill is violating the terms of the landfill's permit granted by the L.A. County Department of Regional Planning. The latest Conditional Use Permit was awarded on July 25, 2017 and authorized the municipal waste landfill to expand and operate for another 30 years.

A trucks dumps garbage atop the Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic. (photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Public Works).

The plaintiffs, Citizens for Chiquita Canyon Closure, represent mostly residents of the small, semi-rural community of Val Verde of about 5,000. Residents from Val Verde, as well as Castaic, Live Oak and Hasley Canyon — areas near the 639-acre landfill in the Santa Clarita Valley — have reported asthma attacks, bloody noses, skin irritations, nausea and heart palpitations to authorities, including the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Chiquita Canyon officials did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment for this story on Thursday.

On Thursday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ordered the landfill to fix the problem of odors and leachate escaping from the landfill into the communities. The Unilateral Administrative Order or UAO is made when the EPA finds a facility "may be an imminent and substantial endangerment to the public health or the environment," the EPA said in a statement.

Many residents say the noxious odors are so strong they are forced indoors day and night and are prevented from enjoying outdoor patios or backyards.

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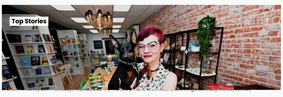

"We are saying to L.A. County they need to close this landfill," said Orchid. "They are creating a risk to public health."

From all of 2023 and including January 2024, the landfill has received about 7,000 odor and health-related complaints. Landfill operators, Chiquita Canyon LLC, has received about 100 notices of violation. SCAQMD scientists confirmed that a subsurface chemical reaction that started in May 2022 producing extremely high temperatures is causing the release of dimethyl sulfide (DMS) at excessive levels, one of the chemicals in the odors and causing complaints.

At AQMD hearings in September and January, the landfill operators said they would abide by conditions required by the agency to install more extraction wells, which would remove excess materials and reduce gaseous odors. Operators also installed an extra flare to burn off more gases and recently agreed to install community monitors in and around the landfill. The landfill was allowed to continue to operate according to an agreement signed with the AQMD last month.

Nonetheless, the residents' lawsuit says the odors have not diminished and that the county permit should be revoked because the landfill is causing a public nuisance and public health threats. The legal complaint cited other examples of more recent violations.

The state Department of Toxic and Substances Control found leachate, a liquid produced by decomposing garbage, pooling on the landfill and running on landfill grounds on Dec. 12, 2023, the lawsuit noted. A month before that, DTSC inspectors "observed leachate boiling out of the landfill," according to the lawsuit.

Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic on Wednesday, October 18, 2023. (Photo by Dean Musgrove, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

On Dec. 27, 2023, the landfill sent 4,600 gallons of wastewater pumped from the landfill to the Radford Alexander Corp, known as Avalon, in Gardena, for treatment. Usually wastewater is treated at this company then sent into the sewers for disposal. However, the landfill identified it as non-hazardous waste and sampling done by Avalon, DTSC and the Los Angeles County Fire Department revealed high levels of benzene, above the toxicity level for the chemical, which is labeled a carcinogen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, thus making the leachate a hazardous waste.

The DTSC said the landfill operator "failed to make a proper waste determination" and cited them for a Class 1 violation. Avalon is not equipped to treat hazardous waste.

On Oct. 3, 2023, an inspection by Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board found leachate seepage. This could mean toxic liquid could be reaching the ground water, a source of drinking water. The leachate seepage had not been previously reported to the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, the AQMD, or the County as required, according to the lawsuit.

Another reason for revoking the operating permit is environmental injustice, the complaint says. Because the landfill's odors are strongest in the nearest community of Val Verde, a place where there is a majority of people of color, this represents a violation of environmental justice laws, the complaint alleges.

As a remedy, the legal complaint suggests that the county send waste by rail to the Mesquite Regional Landfill in the desert, east of Glamis.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger has asked the landfill's operators to provide relocation assistance services for those who live near the landfill.

In a letter Barger sent to a landfill executive, she requested immediate steps be taken to address the impacts on the community members who live near the landfill.

The landfill operators said they are setting up a community benefit and relocation program, but it will take a month to six weeks before it will be implemented.

"We are at an important crossroads. Although we have a significant number of organizations involved from the federal, state and county government levels, it has become increasingly clear to me that there is no predictable end in sight," Barger wrote in the letter addressed to John M. Perkey, vice president and deputy general counsel for Waste Connections, which owns Chiquita landfill and is headquartered in The Woodlands, Texas.

"As you continue working to comply with oversight and odor abatement requirements, the very real and significant impacts to those living near the landfill must be addressed."

Barger's district includes the Santa Clarita Valley and the communities near the landfill.

Additionally, the letter requests the landfill operators to provide air filtration devices, to contribute more funds to the Utility Relief Program, which she initiated to help residents pay utility bills, and support a program that is intended to help homeowners make improvements related to the odors from the landfill.

City News Service contributed to this report

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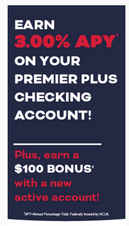
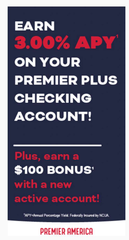
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