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EPA issues violations of toxic air emissions at Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic

The EPA could assess civil penalties or even jail time for violating the federal Clean Air Act

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)

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has issued violations for excessive toxic air emissions against the troubled Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic.

The violations notice, sent to Chiquita Canyon LLC, and its parent company, Waste Connections, on June 4, says the landfill operators are violating the federal Clean Air Act and their operating permit by emitting high levels of toxic gases such as benzene and smog-precursors known as volatile organic compounds that contribute to the formation of ozone — a lung-damaging component of dirty air.

This marks the first time the EPA has issued a violation against the operators of the Castaic landfill. The municipal waste landfill has been the subject of 7,000 odor complaints by the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD), plus dozens of violation notices from the air agency in the past year. Violations were also cited by CalEPA, the state Department of Toxic Substance Control and the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The landfill operators "failed to maintain and operate air pollution control equipment in a manner consistent with good air pollution control practice for minimizing emissions," the EPA said in its violation notice. The letter was addressed to Steve Cassulo, district manager of Chiquita Canyon Landfill, 29201 Henry Mayo Drive, Castaic.

Cassulo did not return a phone call and a voice mail message on Monday, June 10.

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

For more than a year, a subsurface smoldering far beneath an older part of the site has heated up the liquid leachate and extraction pumps to 145 degrees Fahrenheit, causing the hot leachate to overwhelm the removal systems and flow into the nearby river — which state, local and now federal agencies have reported caused the escape of emissions. That resulted in strong odors in nearby communities and made residents sick, forcing many to remain indoors, and some students at a nearby school were kept out of classes.

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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)

Residents from Val Verde, Castaic, Live Oak and Hasley Canyon — areas near the 639-acre landfill in the Santa Clarita Valley — have reported asthma attacks, bloody noses, headaches, skin irritations, nausea and heart palpitations to authorities including the SCAQMD.

SCAQMD scientists confirmed that a subsurface chemical reaction that started in May 2022 produced extremely high temperatures and caused the release of dimethyl sulfide (DMS), hydrogen sulfide and benzene at excessive levels.

Specifically, EPA inspections and analysis concluded that the removal of gases from extraction systems was not always operating. In 2023, the landfill did not properly monitor the gaseous extraction mechanisms1,244 days at extraction wells that had temperatures exceeding 145 degrees Fahrenheit.

In response to orders by the SCAMD, the landfill has installed more wells to remove gases. Recently, it began installing a geomembrane cover over the troubled area of the landfill, in order to prevent — at least temporarily — gases and odors from reaching the nearby communities, according to documents submitted by the landfill operators.

"One of the solutions was to cap it with a plastic cover and they are starting to do that. They are trying it — in desperation. We'll see if it works," said Lynne Plambeck, president of the Santa Clarita Organization for Planning and the Environment (SCOPE), a nearby resident who has followed issues with the landfill for nearly 20 years.

The EPA notice asks the landfill operators to consult with the EPA regulators on how they plan to fix the problem. EPA can issue civil penalties if it is not seeing progress. A violation of the Clean Air Act could invoke criminal penalties, as much as five years in jail for someone who knowingly allowed violations.

Plambeck said the EPA action is significant because it can incur cash penalties, which would more likely be the case, she said. "There may be some pretty hefty fines involved," she said. She said the threat of paying fines may move the landfill owners to action.

She would like an outside agency to find out what is causing the heated reaction beneath an older part of the landfill that is producing the excessive emissions. Once the cause is found, it could be corrected, she said. With the EPA working with state, regional and county agencies, it's more likely a solution can be found, she said.

Violations with the landfill's gas extraction systems that are supposed to remove harmful gases have caused excessive amounts of hydrogen sulfide to be released into the air, which smells like rotten eggs. Hydrogen sulfide can cause headaches, nausea and respiratory stress. It also makes people stay indoors, unable to enjoy sitting on a patio or simply taking a walk, a reduction of quality of life, the EPA reported.

The EPA said according to its analysis, the landfill is releasing excessive amounts of methane, a potent greenhouse gas that contributes to global climate change. Volatile compounds that are released are a major component of ground-level ozone, which can cause chest pains, coughing, throat irritation and may permanently scar lung tissue.

Toxic air compounds such as benzene, can lead to adverse health effects, including respiratory irritation, damage to the nervous system and cancer, the EPA reported in its letter of violations.

A Feb. 7, 2024 health risk screening report done by Roux Associates, Inc., of Burbank, for the Los Angeles County Department of Health, looked at ambient air samples in Val Verde and Castaic communities. It found that the levels of toxic air compounds were similar overall to those in areas not near the landfill.

"While the data collected indicates that on some days there may be an incremental contribution of benzene above background levels to the ambient air that may originate from Chiquita, the overall community levels of benzene and carbon tetrachloride in ambient air are similar to the ambient air at nearby background locations, the AQMD monitoring station in Burbank, and the larger Los Angeles County air basin," the study concluded.

The landfill's Community Advisory Committee meeting is set for Tuesday, June 11, 6:00 p.m., at the Castaic Library, 27971 Sloan Canyon Road, Castaic, 91384. To watch and listen to the meeting using your computer, go to: https://events.gcc.teams.microsoft.com/event/5aac193d-1459-4b77-93d9-79369295451?d07597248-ea38-451b-8abe-a638eddbac81. Or call in at: 323-776-6996 (Conference ID: 478 688 168).

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