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State water agency denies expansion of Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic

L.A. Regional Water Quality Control Board wants more info to decide if expansion will impact groundwater

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

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The Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic was denied a permit to expand operations earlier this month by a state water agency, which cited concerns about toxic leachate running down the landfill's slopes and possibly contaminating underground drinking water supplies.

Because leachate — a toxic liquid and human carcinogen that had been tested for high levels of benzene — might reach the expansion zone, the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board wrote it could not say if expanding the landfill would satisfy state clean water standards. The board also indicated it was possible that additional trash-dumping would violate the federal Clean Water Act.

"As a result, the Los Angeles Water Board cannot currently determine the full impacts of proposed Project activities on water quality and beneficial uses," wrote Susana Arredondo, executive officer, in a letter dated March 1, as a reason for the denial.

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

The landfill operators applied for the expansion on Jan. 4, 2022.

The eight-paragraph letter entitled "Denial of Application" was addressed to Steve Cassulo, district manageof Chiquita Canyon, LLC (CCL). It directed the landfill operators to provide more information and it gave them an opportunity to reapply for the water board permit. Cassulo did not return a phone call on Monday.

The landfill takes in about 9,000 tons of municipal trash daily but is allowed to take 12,000 tons per day, according to CCL. The expansion was planned for an eastern canyon area, while the smoldering waste is located in the northwestern part of the landfill.

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Paul Placek's 8-month old beagle Eileen wears a sign 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 who have lived with strong odors for more than a year said the water board's denial of an expansion was a victory for them.

"It is a great decision. Why would you add to an already deteriorating situation?" said Lloyd Carder, a resident of Hasley Canyon on Monday, March 11. Carter said he smells the odors from the landfill at least twice a week. "Let's not expand the problem."

For more than a year, a subsurface smoldering far beneath an older part of the site has heated up the leachate, causing it to overwhelm the removal systems and letting the emissions escape, state and local agencies have reported. This brought strong odors into nearby communities and made residents sick and forced them to remain indoors, while some students at a nearby school skipped outdoor recess.

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, skin irritations, nausea and heart palpitations to authorities including the South Coast Air Quality Management District. The landfill operators have been issued 100 violations and have received more than 7,000 odor and health-related complaints from nearby residents.

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) at excessive levels, one of the chemicals in the odors. The landfill operators have been cited by the Environmental Protection Agency and state Department of Toxic Substance Control (DTSC) recently for violations.

The DTSC cited the operators on Feb. 21, 2024 for transporting toxic waste pumped from soil in the landfill to a facility in Gardena that was not permitted to accept it. Los Angeles Water Board staff on Oct. 23, 2023 observed leachate flowing into a ditch that empties into a storm water basin but said the operators erected a berm that prevented it from reaching the basin.

A month later, water board inspectors found "the leachate seep was still occurring at the landfill" and issued a violation notice.

The EPA in February issued a statement saying that the landfill presents an "imminent and substantial endangerment."

Lynne Plambeck, who has headed up the Santa Clarita Organization for Planning and the Environment (SCOPE) since the 1990s, guessed that the water board wants to see the landfill operators get the underground reaction under control before any new permits are awarded.

"My supposition is that the regional water board is using it as a pressure point to get them to do cleanup in the other area," Plambeck said on Monday. "They are concerned about the landfill continuing to take in trash, and in a new area, before they know what his happening in the old area."

At SCAQMD 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 air monitors in and around the landfill.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger has helped the landfill operators to establish a program for helping affected residents obtain relocation assistance. "I am pleased Chiquita Canyon Landfill has launched their relocation relief program. The communities impacted by the landfill's odors deserve support that is responsive to their needs. This is a start," Barger wrote in a statement released Monday.

She declined to comment on the state water board ruling.

City News Service contributed to this article.

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