

Kettleman air tests expected

Residents call for moratorium on bid to expand landfill.

By Lewis Griswold / The Fresno Bee

Thursday, March 25, 2010

KETTLEMAN CITY -- A list of 28 chemicals known to cause birth defects was given by state officials to residents concerned about a rash of such defects here, and the officials said they would test for the chemicals in local air, water and soil.

But residents attending a public meeting Thursday on the issue said they want the state to put a moratorium on processing an application to expand the Waste Management hazardous waste landfill near the town, which they suspect is the source of chemical contamination causing birth defects. About 50 residents met with California Environmental Protection Agency officials.

Assembly Member Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, new chairman of the Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee, attended the meeting and said afterward that he favors the moratorium and would try to get the state to honor it.

"A moratorium is a good-faith thing to do," he said.

Officials earlier said the investigation would start by mid-April and a report would be ready in September, but residents said the agency should take time for a thorough study.

Residents also asked that the state test for diesel fumes because of the number of trucks going daily to the landfill, and traveling on nearby Interstate 5 and Highway 41. Lynn Baker, an air pollution specialist for the California Air Resources Board, said diesel fuel contains benzene, so diesel fumes would probably be included in testing.

The birth defects first occurred among five babies born in a 15-month period from August 2007 to November 2008. Three of them died. A sixth case involving a boy with hearing problems came to light later, and state health officials said this month that three babies last year and one this year were born with birth defects.

State officials released no details, but environmental advocates said a girl was born this year with heart problems who needed surgery to live.

Officials at Waste Management say there's no connection between the landfill and birth defects.

CalEPA releases outline for study of toxic town

The Associated Press

In the Merced Sun-Star and other papers, Friday, March 26, 2010

KETTLEMAN CITY, Calif. -- The California Environmental Protection Agency will take air, soil and random drinking water samples as part of its investigation into a rash of birth defects in Kettleman City.

The agency on Thursday released its proposal for testing potential sources of pollutants in and around the San Joaquin Valley farming community.

Scientists compiled lists of chemicals and compounds known to cause birth defects such as the cleft palates some children have suffered in recent years. State officials say at least 11 children in the town of 1,500 were born with health problems since 2007.

Residents have blamed the nearby Chemical Waste Management Co. landfill, the largest hazardous waste facility in the west.

State scientists say their study will include testing of the landfill, petroleum fields, a natural gas pipeline, pesticide spraying on nearby farmfields and vehicle emissions.

State: No moratorium on landfill permit review

By Eiji Yamashita, staff writer

The Hanford Sentinel, Friday, March 26, 2010

State environmental officials on Thursday told a roomful of Kettleman City residents -- much to their dismay -- that they won't put a moratorium on the permit review process for Waste Management's landfill expansion plans. But they promised they won't make a final decision until the governor-ordered birth defect investigation is complete.

The community also won a new supporter: Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara.

Nava, newly appointed chairman of the Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee, publicly supported the community's call for the moratorium, aligning himself with California's two senators.

"Based on what I heard today, the sentiment of the community and the fractured relationship between Kettleman City and the state, there are legitimate concerns," said Nava after hearing emotional testimonials at a Kettleman City meeting held by the California Environmental Protection Agency. "I don't have any choice except to express my support for a moratorium, just as senators [Barbara] Boxer and [Dianne] Feinstein have."

Cal/EPA is one of two agencies ordered by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to investigate an unusual spike in birth defect cases in the impoverished farm worker community. Agency officials were there to explain the process they plan to follow to assess environmental contaminants to which Kettleman City residents may be exposed, and seek feedback and input from the residents.

Dr. Kevin Reilly, chief deputy director of the state Department of Public Health, was also there to update the community on the agency's progress in its health investigation. But as the meeting went beyond the scheduled two-hour limit, the residents asked him to do so on a later date. Reilly agreed to come back to Kettleman City in two weeks.

Nearly two months after Schwarzenegger's order, Cal/EPA is about to begin its part in the birth defect investigation in Kettleman City.

Officials on Thursday night laid out a plan to collect air, soil and water samples in and around Kettleman starting late April, to look for chemical contaminants that could cause birth defects.

Cal/EPA says it will investigate the environmental exposure levels of 28 toxic chemicals, such as DDT, mercury, lead and PCBs, and that it will look at farming operations, Waste Management's toxic waste facility nearby, former petroleum facilities, water sources as well as illegal dumping sites for those chemicals.

This is what Kettleman City residents have wanted for many years, and now two state agencies are tackling the investigation concurrently.

But if Thursday's meeting was any indication, the controversy and disagreements surrounding the Kettleman City health scare are far from over. Activists and residents came with questions, pleas, criticisms and emotional testimony.

They also demanded a straight answer from state officials to the question of whether they are putting a moratorium on the permit process for Waste Management in light of the number of reported birth defect cases that keeps rising.

After repeated questions, Allan Hirsch, chief deputy director of Cal/EPA Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, said, "The process of gathering information for a permit -- there's not going to be a moratorium on that ... But there will be no decision made on the Chem Waste facility until the information we're coming up with is there."

Maricela Mares-Alatorre, a life-long resident of Kettleman City and an activist, was concerned the study is being rushed.

"It feels like this process is being rushed through. The comment period ending in two weeks is a glaring example of that," she said. "I don't care how long this investigation takes, as long as it keeps us safe."

Tears were shed when one of the mothers spoke.

Viridiana Franco, 26, choked up as she spoke of her newborn daughter Azul and how she had to undergo open-heart surgery within two weeks of her birth. Her baby is the possible 11th case since late 2007, when the unusual spike of birth defect cases began.

She always had a bad feeling during pregnancy because of other mothers whose babies had been affected, Franco said in Spanish. And her worst fear became a reality when her baby was born, she said.

Meanwhile, some activists said looking for toxins in the environment isn't enough. They wanted Cal/EPA to evaluate the adipose tissue concentration of toxic pollutants in residents. Tissue monitoring data can alert health officials to study specific environmental chemicals.

Residents also didn't like the fact that when it comes to pesticides, the agency proposes to look at the data from 2007 and 2008 and not 2009, although DPH officials -- after repeated pressure from activists -- recently confirmed the knowledge of three birth defect cases during that year.

Officials said they don't have methods available to examine the most recent data, so they are using a computer program to model the worst case airborne pesticide concentration scenarios around Kettleman based on data available.

The reporter can be reached at 583-2429. To comment on this story, go to www.HanfordSentinel.com.