

EPA faults Kettleman Hills landfill lab

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee, Wed., June 2, 2010

A hazardous-waste landfill suspected by Kettleman City residents of causing birth defects has been inaccurately testing treated contaminants for five years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says.

Officials at the Waste Management site in Kettleman Hills said they immediately began using an independent testing laboratory last week when the EPA notified them of the problem with their own laboratory. But company officials disagree that their laboratory was producing flawed results.

"We believe the findings in the EPA letter are inaccurate and based on a misinterpretation of test results," Brian Bowen, Waste Management's director of environmental protection, said in a prepared statement. "EPA's approach was fundamentally flawed."

It is the second time this year that the EPA has announced a serious problem at the landfill. In April, the agency ordered Waste Management to correct flawed disposal practices for dangerous toxins, called PCBs, which are found in transformers and coolants.

The laboratory problems are significant, EPA officials said, because the tests determine whether treated contaminants are within acceptable levels before they are buried at the landfill.

"When we see a problem repeated over time, it's something of serious concern to us," said Jared Blumenfeld, EPA administrator for the Pacific Southwest region.

By federal law, Waste Management could face penalties up to \$37,500 per day for violations -- which could add up to millions of dollars in fines for its landfill laboratory.

The EPA relies on private companies for testing treated contaminants because the government does not have a staff large enough for the task, officials said.

The problem presents another obstacle to the Waste Management's efforts to expand the landfill about three miles from Kettleman City. Kings County supervisors approved an expansion permit in December, but state and federal agencies have not signed off yet.

EPA officials say they would not consider the expansion permit until Waste Management fixes problems at the landfill.

Waste Management also faces allegations from Kettleman City residents who think there is a connection between the landfill and birth defects in their community of 1,500.

Since 2007, 10 babies have been born with defects, including cleft lip and cleft palate facial deformities. Three of the babies died. An 11th baby was stillborn with birth defects.

"This shows that many of the claims made by Chem Waste in the past are suspect because it is now clear that the laboratory had problems with accuracy," said resident Angela Carillo in a prepared statement. "Our suspicions have been validated."

The Waste Management laboratory problems surfaced after Blumenfeld visited the landfill in February and later sent an inspection team to the site. The inspection showed treatment of hazardous waste failed to reduce the concentrations of the metals zinc and cadmium to government standards for disposal.

Health effects for high levels of zinc include anemia and nervous system disorders. For cadmium, there can be kidney and lung problems.

In its own records, the EPA found documents showing testing problems dating back to 2005. Efforts to correct the problems had been unsuccessful, according to the EPA letter.

Blumenfeld characterized the lack of EPA follow-up as "an internal issue," which predated his arrival.

Bradley Angel, executive director of Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, based in San Francisco, thanked the EPA for cracking down on Waste Management, but said the problem should have been caught long ago.

Sacto 9-1-1: Controlled burns set for Galt, Elk Grove

By Robert D. Davila

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Firefighters will conduct controlled burning training exercises Thursday and Friday in Galt and Elk Grove.

The Cosumnes Community Services District Fire Department will perform the training exercises for firefighters between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., a news release states.

In Elk Grove, crews will conduct a burn at the Elk Grove Airport property on Grant Line Road. In Galt, firefighters will burn vegetation on a 20-acre parcel at 10278 Kost Road, directly south of Meadowview Park.

The exercises are contingent upon approval from the Sacramento Air Quality Management District, officials said.