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Exide: Demonstrators Want Tighter Pollution Controls

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Demonstrators rallied Monday to demand tougher statewide action on plants like the Exide Technologies battery recycling plant in Vernon, where recent samples showed elevated levels of lead in the yards of 39 nearby homes.

The group of community members gathered outside of Exide's plant at 2700 S. Indiana St. in Vernon, calling for statewide reform of California's environmental regulatory agencies.

"Unfortunately, Exide is not the only culprit in this statewide issue," said Strela Cervas of the California Environmental Justice Alliance.



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With embattled Exide as their backdrop, protesters on Monday called on state legislators to get tough with polluters and to protect the public. (EGP photo by Fred Zermeno)

"There are clearly deep flaws in state agencies that regulate toxic polluters, and we are calling on elected officials to tackle these dangerous inadequacies."

An Exide spokeswoman said the company did not want to comment on Monday's rally.

Exide officials previously said they have agreed to invest more than \$5 million in the plant over the next two years, bringing its total investment to more than \$20 million since 2010. Also, they said they are continuing to work with local and state regulators for a long-term operational plan.

Teresa Marquez, who lives less than two miles from the plant in Boyle Heights, said her grandchildren moved out two years ago because they were having difficulty breathing.

I found out once they moved out of here they don't have the breathing problem," Marquez said.

"They don't wake up at night trying to breathe and gasping for air. They call me and say 'Grandma, we're OK now.'"

She said the children are doing better in school, and that she would like the plant to be closed.

State Sen. Ricardo Lara, who sent a representative to the rally, said in a statement residents from surrounding communities have suffered for too long.

"It's time to hold Exide accountable for the damage they have done," Lara said.

Lara's staff member, Cory Allen, said the state senator introduced SB 712 this year, which would require Exide to get into compliance or be shut down permanently.

The plant has been closed in recent weeks as upgrades were made to the facility. Last week, the South Coast Air Quality Management District ruled to deny Exide more time to install the upgraded "negative pressure" furnaces, and on Friday, citing 18 consecutive days of violations to the agency's "ambient lead standard," they filed a new petition with the agency's Hearing Board seeking to prohibit Exide from continuing facility upgrades.

Exide officials said last week the construction work was likely responsible for recent reports of elevated lead levels in plant emissions.

"Exide's facility is so contaminated with lead that they are causing violations ... even when the plant is not operating," said Barry Wallerstein, SCAQMD's executive officer. "For this reason, Exide needs to treat its plant like a hazardous waste site during maintenance and renovation work."

SCAQMD's petition alleges, "... If Exide were to reopen and resume lead-smelting operations, the facility would be even more likely to continue violating lead standards.

SCAQMD officials said in a statement last week that they are continuing "to work on multiple fronts to compel Exide to reduce its toxic emissions and comply with existing regulations," including fighting the company's effort in the courts to block the deadline to reduce arsenic emissions

In response to SCAQMD's denial of more time to come into compliance, Exide officials said they were working to contract with other companies to continue recycling operations, adding that the company has made significant progress in meeting the requirements.



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Despite being closed, high levels of lead continued to be emitted from Exide, according to air quality officials. (EGP photo by Fred Zermeno)

"Previously completed upgrades to the facility have already achieved a plant-wide 95 percent reduction of arsenic emissions, which has been maintained since 2013," according to the company.

The battery recycling plant has been operating under a temporary permit from the state Department of Toxic Substances Control for the past 32 years and is the only facility left in the state that has not been fully permitted, DTSC officials said last year.

DTSC had been strongly criticized by community activists and elected officials for allowing the lead-acid battery recycling plant, one of only two such facilities west of the Rockies, to continue to operate on a temporary permit, despite more than a decade of violations.

At an often-raucous town hall meeting in Boyle Heights last October, Assembly Speaker Jose Pérez called on state regulators to understand the frustration of residents, noting that "Exide has been an air quality offender for years," but allowed by state regulators to continue operating.

"Generations feel ignored by the very people who are supposed to protect them," EGP reported Pérez as saying. "When you look at the decades of harm on this community, it is incumbent on you to do everything... you have got to do everything in your power to shut down repeat offenders."

In operation since 1922, the plant recycles 23,000 to 41,000 batteries daily.

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