Agency OK'd Hazardous Waste Shipment for Years

the Associated Press

MECCA, Calif. (AP) — Records show California regulators allowed a Riverside County soil recycling facility to accept hazardous waste for years, even though they heard numerous concerns that the plant was not properly permitted, according to a newspaper report on Thursday.

The Department of Toxic Substances Control heard concerns from industry officials, county firefighters and even some its own employees that Western Environmental was accepting contaminated soil without state approval, the Riverside Press-Enterprise reported (http://bit.ly/nlg1V6).

More than 1,500 pages of recently released documents detail correspondence by other waste management companies asking whether the practice was legal. In 2007, an executive with an Anaheim company sent an email message saying the facility, which sits on tribal land in the desert community of Mecca, had been taking in dirt laced with petroleum, heavy metals and other chemicals for more than two years even though it had no state permit to accept such materials.

In a July 2010 email, a senior staff attorney for the department wrote: "We have no record of authorizing them to accept hazardous waste in California."

The department took no action until April when it was revealed that its staff had approved the shipment of hazardous waste from school construction sites in the Los Angeles area to Western Environmental. Then the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency cracked down on the plant after residents who live near it complained about being sickened by a putrid stench.

Department spokesman Jim Marxen said the concerns were known by some agency staff, but they never reached top managers.

"Yes, there were red flags everywhere," Marxen said. "It shouldn't have happened."

The department's director has ordered an audit to determine how the facility operated for seven years without state approval.

The plant, which was temporarily shut down in May, can take shipments of contaminated soil that is not considered hazardous and meets recently imposed federal requirements.

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