California Shuts Down Hazardous Battery Recycler

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — After years of complaints from the surrounding community, state environmental officials on Wednesday ordered a Southern California battery recycling company to suspend operations after saying hazardous metal sludge was being discharged into leaking pipelines.

The action against Exide Technologies in Vernon marked the first time since 1997 that a major hazardous waste recycler has had its permit to operate suspended, state officials said.

"We made a decision this poses an imminent danger to public health and we took the step of suspending Exide's operations," said Debbie Raphael, director of the Department of Toxic Substances Control.

The shutdown came after the South Coast Air Quality Management District showed in March that the company has high levels of arsenic in its emissions "causing a potential impact to as many as 110,000 residents in a large geographical area."

The company is supposed to hold community meetings in May to explain the potential health risk that exists and to show the steps it is taking to reduce emissions.

The company will remain closed until it comes into compliance, Raphael said.

Exide spokeswoman Susan Jaramillo said the company does not comment on administrative or legal actions.

The facility recycles 22 million lead-acid motor vehicle batteries a year but has operated for 17 years under an interim permit from the Department of Toxic Substances Control.

The temporary shutdown at Exide points to a larger problem Raphael has been trying to tackle during her two-year tenure: Roughly one in five of the state's 118 businesses that handle toxic waste operate without a current permit.

Raphael said she has launched an overhaul of the permitting process to deal with the long-standing problem.

Los Angeles City Council member Jose Huizar, whose Boyle Heights district is near the recycling facility, applauded the decision to suspend operations.

"I do question why the company was allowed to operate with an interim permit for

so long when a full permit would demand a higher level of specificity, which clearly is warranted in this case," he said.

Exide operates at a facility that was opened in 1920. It inherited some of the problems, including metals that have leached into groundwater, and must clean them up. Records show it was cited by the department in 2009 for illegally storing lead-contaminated sludge.

The department gave the company 30 days to pay a $103,200 fine that still hasn't been collected. It also was cited in 2009 and 2005 for improperly storing old batteries and failing to notify the state that it was taking batteries from Canada, records show.

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