Calif. Recommends Expansion of Hazardous Dump

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FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — California regulators are recommending allowing a major expansion of the largest hazardous waste dump in the Western United States, even though some residents blame the dump for birth defects and have opposed the expansion, officials said on Tuesday.

The California Department of Toxic Substances Control said it has issued a draft expansion permit that would allow the landfill near Kettleman City — a farmworker community in the state's Central Valley midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles — to expand by 5 million cubic yards.

The landfill, which is operated by Chemical Waste Management, currently houses 10.7 million cubic yards of hazardous waste.

Environmental organizations and residents have opposed the expansion of the 1,600-acre landfill for years. The landfill has been fined numerous times by state and federal regulators for improper waste disposal and other problems.

"A draft permit will send a message to industrial polluters that you can violate your permit constantly for years, commit serious and chronic violations, and still get your permit," said Bradley Angel of the group Greenaction.

The expansion permit was based on "bogus studies" and "hiding the number of birth defects and infant deaths," Angel said, adding that officials did not give Spanish speakers, who make up a large number of Kettleman City residents, enough time to testify at hearings.

The dump's owners say there's no evidence linking the facility to the birth defects and cancer-causing chemicals there were too low to affect the nearby community.

A recent report by California health officials found no common cause for the birth defects and left residents to speculate about what other potential hazards — a constant flow of diesel trucks, pesticide residue in the surrounding fields and multiple high-tension power lines — might pose the biggest risk to their children.

The permit expansion carries restrictive requirements, including enhanced air and groundwater monitoring and sampling, a clean truck program that would reduce emissions from incoming diesel trucks, more inspections and enhanced public outreach, state officials said.

The landfill accepts toxic waste not allowed into most landfills, including carcinogenic PCBs, herbicides and other chemicals, and lead-contaminated soil from

cleanup sites.

"We're pleased that after extensive and comprehensive scrutiny of facility the state has issued a draft permit for expansion. The facility provides a necessary environmental service to California by handing the hazardous waste the state generates," said Chemical Waste spokeswoman Jennifer Andrews.

Last November, the state issued 72 violations alleging the company failed to report small spills that occurred between 2008 and 2012 — though they posed no health threats to the public. In May 2011, the state levied $46,000 in fines against the company for failing to report two spills.

That same year, the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state toxics department levied $1 million in fines against the firm for having improperly calibrated lab equipment that thwarted efforts to accurately analyze chemical concentrations in waste. The EPA found the same problem with equipment five years earlier and said officials failed to fix it.

Federal officials also fined the operator nearly $10,000 for improper waste disposal.

Officials said the violations caused no off-site health impacts and "have not reached a level that would trigger a permit denial," said Brian Johnson, director of hazardous waste management.

The public has 60 days to comment on the draft permit, which still requires final approval from the toxics department.

Officials also set a long-term goal to reduce the volume of hazardous wasted disposed at class 1 facilities such as Kettleman City by 50 percent by 2025. That goal has no enforcement triggers at this time, but entails meetings and workshops with industry, public interest groups, local governments and elected officials to come up with strategies for waste reduction.

California has generated an average of 1.7 million tons of hazardous waste each year for the past 10 years. About 600,000 tons ended up annually in the Kettleman or Buttonwillow landfills, officials said.

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