

## Environmental report: Feb. 22, 2016

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### **Quemetco Update:**

The lead/acid recycling plant, located in the City of Industry, is currently going through an extension of permit process involving the California Dept. of Toxic Substances Control and permit for expansion of throughput from South Coast Air Quality Management District. Great concern has been raised concerning potential environmental damage by lead, arsenic and other emissions produced by this plant. Although it is located in the City of Industry, residents of Hacienda Heights live within about 400 feet of the plant and many schools, residential areas and commercial properties lie within a one-mile radius around the plant. The company has had a long history of violations, although recent improvements in pollution control equipment, have reduced these markedly. Concern has been locally raised due to contamination found in association with the Exide plant in Vernon due to contamination of soil around that facility and because Quemetco is now the only plant west of the Rockies that is available to recycle these batteries.

After the annual environmental report from HHIA about Quemetco was presented at the Jan. 27, 2016 annual dinner meeting, HHIA was asked by Supervisor Knabe in attendance at the meeting to prepare information concerning the history and problems of pollution that have been a long-time concern to the local community around the plant. An information sheet was prepared and submitted to his office. This is appended to the end of this Environmental Report.

DTSC has recently rejected plans submitted by the lead/acid battery recycling plant for testing soil around the plant. Quemetco has claimed that lead from other sources (i.e. paint, old formulations of gasoline) could have contributed to soil buildup over the years. DTSC is now requiring the company to develop a protocol for fingerprinting the sources of the lead encountered during testing before testing can begin and a final plan approved.

### **Puente Hills Landfill Park Update:**

The Draft Environmental Impact Report is being prepared for the Los Angeles County Dept. of Parks and Recreation. A date for release of this document for discussion and comment by the public has not been announced. It is expected to be sometime during the summer.

## Information Sheet: Quemetco (parent company RSR)

Location: 720 S. Seventh St., City of Industry

This plant has been in the City of Industry since 1959 and now is adjacent to residential development and a number of schools. It is the only lead/acid battery recycling facility in the U.S. west of the Rocky Mountains since the closure of Exide in Vernon. It takes materials from the western states and foreign countries to recycle. Hacienda Heights residents live as close as 400 feet from Quemetco. For that reason, HHIA is very concerned about this project because of the potential for harm from soil contamination from past operations that have not been addressed and for any problems that would result from current/future expanded activities. HHIA is working together with the Clean Air Coalition of Avocado Heights of North Whittier (CAC) whose residents are also affected by Quemetco's activities. CAC residents are in the 1<sup>st</sup> Supervisorial District of Hilda Solis.

The plant currently processes 1.2 million pounds of car (lead/acid) batteries each day. Batteries are received at the plant in packed pallets where the batteries are processed by separating the liquid acid and the leaded materials from the battery casings. Acid is neutralized and the wastewater flows to the wastewater treatment plant for wastewater treatment then reuse or discharge to the Sanitation District. Leaded contents are transferred to the in-house smelters for lead recovery. Lead ingots are produced. The battery casings are crushed into small pieces, washed and dried prior to transfer to a waiting truck for transportation to KW Plastics of California in Bakersfield for plastic recycling. However, small amounts of plastic are mixed with materials that are smelted, resulting in air emissions that are problematic.

Concern has been raised recently because on March 12, 2015 the DTSC received from Quemetco application for a 10-year extension of its permits to operate. Their last general permit was issued in 2005. They are requesting authorization from DTSC to continue the storage, treatment and disposal of hazardous wastes at their facility. Separately, Quemetco is seeking permission from the South Coast Air Quality Management District to boost the amount of batteries it recycles by 25 percent. **Quemetco did not include the proposed increase in throughput in its Title 22 (hazardous waste) permit renewal application so DTSC is processing this application on the assumption of current levels of throughput.**

In addition, awareness of the potential problem on the part of the public has grown because of the discoveries of contamination surrounding the Exide plant and also because residents of Hacienda Heights live closer to Quemetco than in the case of Exide.

The company has been issued numerous violations over its years of operation:

1995: Ordered to clean contaminated soil at Industry plant by state Department of Toxic Substances Control

1998: Cited by SCAQMD for exceeding allowance for lead

1998: Plant emits 2.6 million pounds of toxic waste, according to U.S. EPA Toxic Release Inventory (1996 data)

2000: Proposition 65 warnings indicate arsenic and lead emissions spread into La Puente, Industry and Hacienda Heights

2004: Soil, dust and sediment samples revealed up to 52,000 mg/kg around the plant.

2005: Emergency interim measures to remove or cover lead-contaminated soil, dust and sediment and cleanup along San Jose Creek

2006: Highest cancer burden of any business in the SCAQMD jurisdiction. Cancer risk is due to emissions of arsenic, 1,3-butadiene, cadmium and hexavalent chromium

2006: Quemetco reports a cancer risk of 22 in 1 million, down from 33 in 1 million in 2000.

2011: Ranked No. 6 out of Top Ten facilities for toxic releases in California, according to EPA.

2012: SCAQMD violation for failing to reconcile third and fourth quarter emissions of nitrogen oxides, a smog-forming emission, and for exceeding allowances from the 2010 compliance year.

2012 Area re-sampled and found recontamination that required emergency measures to remove lead contaminated soil, dust and sediment.

2013: Source test from Nov. 22 reveals levels of arsenic higher than previous year. Company ordered to prepare a health risk assessment using higher emissions rates. (Source: EPA, SCAQMD, San Gabriel Valley Tribune archives and DTSC presentation

Concern in Hacienda Heights and Avocado Heights of North Whittier exists because it is regulated by the same state agencies that have failed to protect the communities around the now closed Exide plant in Vernon. The DTSC has also recently issued permits for other projects in which there was an indication of inadequate evaluation by the agency. Concern about the agency at the State level is high enough that a newly formed 3-person oversight committee, comprised of a scientist with an expertise in toxic material, a community representative, and a local government expert, will be monitoring DTSC's permitting procedures.

The Department of Toxic Substances Control, South Coast Air Quality Management District, and the Water Board are not working together to regulate Quemetco, which has a long history of permit violations. In fact, AQMD is currently processing Quemetco's application to expand its throughput by 25% while DTSC is processing a renewal of Quemetco's hazardous waste permit, which does NOT mention their application to expand throughput. Meanwhile, Quemetco is discharging lead and zinc into stormwater (which percolates into our groundwater) at levels way beyond benchmarks and the Water Board only requests better housekeeping practices. (CAC website)

Several studies have indicated there, indeed, may be a problem associated with Quemetco. In 1991 a study conducted by Cal Poly found high levels of soluble lead in 19 of 22 samples taken

from around the plant. Levels as high as 13,300 mg/kg (threshold at the time was 1000mg/kg) adjacent to the plant). In addition, samples taken from areas around the plant indicated high levels of chromium, nickel, and lead in areas less than 2 km distance from the plant. No follow-up on these studies was undertaken.

Another study (Mar. 1996) of lead levels in blood of children found the soil lead, dust lead, outdoor paint lead, and air lead levels were higher in the exposed than in a control community located in an area of Southern California not in the vicinity of a similar plant. In contrast, the lead content of the indoor paint samples in the two communities was not appreciably different. The blood lead levels of the children living near the secondary lead smelter were within the normal range ( $<5\mu/dl$ ) at that time. Now, however, there is considered to be no safe lead level, particularly for children since they come in contact with dust and soil during play and are developing neurologically rapidly. Lead in the blood remains for a short half-life, but neurological damage that can result lasts a lifetime.

DTSC investigated off-site deposition and accumulation of airborne emissions of lead on the periphery of Quemetco in 2004 and 2013 and required Quemetco to expand the lateral extent of airborne and/or surface water borne emissions, including but not limited to lead. DTSC required the work-plan to address residue of historical emission deposition/accumulation. This sampling had not been performed as of Mar. 16, 2015. DTSC also informed the CAC that the testing protocols they have requested of Quemetco was to be performed in fall of 2014 but this testing has not been started (Letter from DTSC, Apr. 30, 2015 to CAC). The prospect of new soil tests raises concerns that legacy pollution from the facility's more than 50 years of operations may require an expensive cleanup similar to the one underway around Exide.

CAC and HHIA have held meetings with the Los Angeles County Health Dept. (Dec., 2015) and CAC recently met with Supervisor Hilda Solis (Jan. 2016), Supervisor for their area who also was active in the Exide plant closure and whose district is also affected by Quemetco. She has expressed an interest in this problem at this meeting with CAC.

#### **Local Concerns:**

- Contamination exists in soils surrounding the facility that have not been addressed from past operations. Although Quemetco has installed pollution control equipment lead levels in the soil, in homes, around schools from previous activities may be causing health problems. CAC recently (Nov.-Dec. 2015) conducted a health survey of residents in Hacienda Heights and Avocado Heights. Although not a scientific study, reports indicated many incidents of cancer and respiratory problems. A number of reports of illnesses of pets were also received.
- The state of California has known about elevated levels of lead in soil at dozens of properties near the plant for 24 years and little has been done to investigate the potential problem
- Is there local groundwater contamination?
- Reliability of testing done by Quemetco.
- Possibility of release of a number of airborne cancer causing chemicals into the surrounding community.

- The coming El Niño will wash lead from the soil into the environment and San Jose Creek.

**Current Status:**

DTSC had requested testing protocols from Quemetco as part of the permitting process. Quemetco's plans were rejected 4 times. DTSC developed its own testing program. Quemetco initially rejected this. DTSC and Quemetco are currently consulting on final plans for the distance sampling that will occur in a radius around the plant, the number of samples required and if fingerprinting to determine the source of lead should be conducted. DTSC officials also say preliminary results on soil samples near Exide showed that facility is the source of contamination fouling the properties tested. Technicians there found traces of the chemical element antimony, which suggests the lead came from the type of smelting process used to recycle batteries. As a result, DSTC plans to test for antimony in the soil samples taken around Quemetco.

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