

Air quality officials discuss Compton pollution issues

By ANNE ARTLEY

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COMPTON — The South Coast Air Quality Management District has issued five notices of violation to local businesses for emitting potentially harmful substances.

Four of the five were cited for emitting hexavalent chromium, a cancer-causing pollutant.

The agency presented its results of an inspection into whether hexavalent chromium is present in the air above the city during a town hall meeting Aug. 2. A panel of SCAQMD representatives fielded questions and demonstrated an air monitor at the Dollarhide Community Center.

Air quality officials also reported that the agency has issued 16 notices to comply and has collected suspected hexavalent chrome material from two facilities for lab analysis.

Sam Atwood, an AQMD spokesman, described an order to comply as a “fix-it ticket,” where the agency will request more information from a company on its processes. It is different from a notice of violation, which comes with fines and possibly an order of abatement if a company does not respond to the problem.

Compton resident Maxine Nowell said that pollution has been an issue “on and off” in the 45 years she’s lived in the city.

“You can smell it,” she said. “It’s like you left the gas on.”

Even though Nowell said it’s not as prominent as in the past, “if they’re still getting ratings on it, there’s still work to be done.”



Officials of the South Coast Air Quality Management District conduct a town hall meeting in Compton Aug. 2 to discuss emissions of cancer-causing pollutants coming from local businesses. The agency which monitors air quality in Southern California has been monitoring air quality in Compton since May

Photo by Anne Artley

The AQMD decided in May to conduct the investigation after hexavalent chromium was found at toxic levels in Paramount last fall. The agency chose to focus on Compton since the city is home to a concentration of metal-processing facilities, which are known to emit the compound.

In Paramount, the testing found that hexavalent chromium was primarily coming from Anaplex, a metal-processing company, and Aerocraft, a heat-treating firm for aircraft manufacture and maintenance. Both companies serve the aviation industry.

Hexavalent chromium can cause

lung cancer when inhaled over long periods of time.

“There’s a lot of people in my neighborhood who have died of cancer,” said Sonia De Leon, a Paramount resident who came to the town hall meeting to warn attendees of the gravity of the situation.

“I know of four people in one household who have died of cancer. That’s not normal,” she said.

While De Leon said those people were diagnosed with different types of cancer, not just lung cancer, she compared the circumstances to the health problems caused by smoking.

“Smoking is only supposed to cause lung cancer, but for someone else it could be skin cancer, or throat cancer,” she said. “We just found out about the hexavalent chromium levels in November, but they were probably the same 25 years ago.”

Hexavalent chromium is used as pigments in dyes, paints, inks and plastics. It is also added to paints, primers and other surface coatings as an anticorrosive agent. The compound gained infamy in the 2000 film “Erin Brokovich,” as a pollutant in the water of Hinkley, Calif.

A few weeks after the AQMD an-

nounced its investigation in Compton, Rep. Nanette Barragan, the city’s representative in Congress, called on the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to provide the necessary resources for a speedy analysis.

Since then, the EPA has provided about half a million dollars in funding for lab equipment to test for hexavalent chromium, representatives for AQMD said.

Along with concerns for health and the environment, others in the audience expressed fear for losing jobs, or that regulations would force their businesses to close.

“The AQMD is saying that metal-finishers are killing you, and many of us are following the rules,” said Alan Olick, president of General Brite Plating, located in the Arts District of Los Angeles.

“The meters are picking up what’s in the air outside the building, not what’s coming out of the building,” he said. “The cancer could be coming from mold, insects, the food they eat. ... It looks like metal finishers are punishing everybody.”

Bryan Leiker, the executive director of the Metal Finishing Association of Southern California, also emphasized the importance of considering the total environment.

“Other factors could influence the readings on the monitors such as construction and diesel fuel,” he said.

He pointed to a higher than average reading of hexavalent chromium at three of the sites on July 9, a Sunday.

“Why was it so high when all the businesses were closed?” he asked.