

Environmental Report: May 15, 2017

Submitted by: Joan Licari, Environmental Chair

Quemetco

I attended a meeting of the Clean Air Coalition of North Whittier and Avocado Heights on Apr. 19, 2017. We had hoped for a report on results from the California Department of Toxic Substances soil testing program within ¼ mile of the Quemetco leac/acid battery recycling plant of 7th street in City of Industry. However, these were not yet available. Concern exists about the impact of accumulation of metals in the bodies of humans, particularly young children and pregnant women from exposure to lead, arsenic, cadmium and antimony

However, there was a report on from the U.S.C. Keck Medical program about a study that will be conducted in the Hacienda Heights and Avocado Heights in the near future. The USC study will include an evaluation of children living within 2.5 miles from the Quemetco plant. Area children will be tested for metals including lead, arsenic, antimony and cadmium. Target ages for individuals in the study will be between 5 and 12 years who have lived in the area for the past two years. A comparison will be made of blood- metal contents between results from Vernon and our local areas.

Health risks on children not known well. Our local study will include 100 children. A dietary survey will be included as some foods such as rice based products and fish may contribute metal concentrations. Also, a part of this study will include investigations on the route metals take to be included in human tissues.

A meeting will be scheduled in the Hacienda Heights Community Center at a date to be determined. Parents will bring their children to be tested. Urine samples and fingernail clippings from the children will be collected at that time and a survey completed by the parents. Urine samples indicate recent contamination while fingernails will indicate results of accumulation over longer periods.

Results from this study will ultimately be compared to similar investigations in New Hampshire and Texas.

Relative to our concerns about Quemetco, it was reported that a bill, AB-1316 Public health: childhood lead poisoning: prevention, has been introduced by Assemblyman Bill Quirk (D-Hayward) that would change the state's Health and Safety Code to require testing for all children ages 6 months to 6 years. There is a growing national concern about lead poisoning in children that has prompted the California lawmaker to introduce legislation to ensure that all of the state's kids are tested for the toxic metal.

Current regulations require lead testing only for children in government assistance programs, such as Medi-Cal and WIC, a supplemental nutrition program, as well as for kids who spend a significant amount of time in buildings built before 1978. That leaves many children untested who nevertheless may be exposed, said Quirk, who also chairs the Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials.

He cited contamination of the water supply in Flint, Mich., and hazardous levels of lead found in the soil near a battery recycling facility in the tiny city of Vernon near Los Angeles, as examples of why he authored this bill.

Kaiser Health News, which publishes California Healthline reports that “Lead, which can be found in dust, soil, water or paint, has been identified as a leading environmental threat to children’s health. Exposure to it has been linked to lifelong health and developmental problems, including learning and hearing disabilities, behavioral problems, hyperactivity and delayed puberty, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In the 1970s, federal and state policies banned the use of lead in gasoline and paint. However, many older buildings still have lead paint or pipes that continue to pose risks, Quirk said.

In 2012, 650,402 children under 21 in California were tested for lead. About 13,000 — 2 percent — had lead levels above the threshold considered potentially unsafe, according to data from the state’s Department of Public Health. That’s the latest data available according to the agency, which houses a childhood lead poisoning prevention branch and fund.

In some regions of California, children’s lead exposure is considerably higher than the statewide rate reported by the public health department.

A Reuters analysis found that more than 7 percent of children screened in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland had elevated levels of lead in their blood. In Selma, a city located about 15 miles southeast of Fresno, more than 6 percent of children tested showed high levels of lead.

In comparison, about 5 percent of children tested in Flint showed high levels of lead in their blood after the drinking water was found to be contaminated, the Reuters report showed.

Nationwide, about 2.5 percent of children aged 6 and younger have elevated lead levels, defined as at least 5 micrograms per deciliter, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”

Quirk said the Reuters analysis highlighted potential gaps in the way states gather data on lead contamination in children.

“Given the ages of California’s infrastructure, lead exposure risks are ubiquitous,” Quirk said in an email. “The current screening process only tests certain children. Better data can help us better identify clusters and arm the state with a thorough, more comprehensive response.”

John Froines, a professor emeritus at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, said screening all children is a good step toward addressing lead contamination, but scientists still disagree on what should be considered safe levels of lead.

“For years, regulatory agencies have tried to set blood lead standards, but the fact of the matter is that there are no safe levels,” Froines said.

When lead is inhaled or ingested, it travels through the bloodstream and ends up in bones and soft-tissue organs such as the brain, Froines said. In bones, lead can accumulate over time and last up to 32 years, he said.

Under the current lead-testing regulations, screening of children is paid for by the child's health plan or Medi-Cal. Quirk said this would continue to be the case if testing were extended to all of the state's children.

The California Association of Health Plans is reviewing Quirk's bill to assess how much it would cost, according to a spokeswoman for the insurance industry group.

Quirk's office anticipates the bill would be considered by the Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials in early April."