

# Riverside-area cement plant's neighbors react to news about toxic carcinogen in the air.

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The air above the TXI Riverside Cement Plant was blinding white Tuesday, blocking out the blue sky. For as long as Mary Alfonso, 79, can remember, dust from the factory has been a feature of life on "the Hill" just above it.

When she and her husband moved to the neighborhood near the border of Riverside and San Bernardino counties 52 years ago, they joked about its uniqueness because all the roofs were white.

"Then my car turned white — and it started out green!" said Alfonso.

The dust was annoying, and people in the neighborhood assumed it wasn't good for them. But despite complaints over the years, they said, no one ever cleaned it up completely.

On Tuesday, residents of "the Hill" learned that the South Coast Air Quality Management District had found high levels of hexavalent chromium, a toxic carcinogen, in dust blowing from the outdoor "clinker piles" of the century-old plant in the Rubidoux area. And to add insult to injury, no officials had notified them.

"It would be nice if they even told us there was a problem," Alfonso said as she leaned on her cane outside her neat stucco home.

The high hexavalent chromium levels, revealed Monday in The Times, were first detected by staff from the AQMD in January. But AQMD executive officer Barry Wallerstein said it would have been irresponsible to notify neighbors of hazardous emissions then, before the agency had pinned down the cement plant as the source.

He said that he and his staff would provide full details of their investigation at a community meeting next week and that the agency was preparing multiple citations against the plant for violation of dust control and air pollution regulations, which should be issued by week's end. Under state law, negligent emission of air contaminants is punishable by a fine of up to \$25,000 a day. Higher fines — up to \$1 million — can be imposed under the Health and Safety code, for greater degrees of culpability and harm, including deaths.

AQMD staff found that levels of the potent carcinogen were 10 times higher than normal directly behind the plant on the downwind side.

TXI Riverside Cement spokesman Frank Sheets said Tuesday that the company still had not received notification from the AQMD that the factory was the source of the high chromium levels. But, he said, "if residents are concerned, we're concerned."

He said the company would also probably hold a community meeting: "We think it's important to lay out on the table every-



**BREATHLESS:** Maria Gonzalez says she wakes up gasping, and her husband can't work because of sinus problems.

thing the district is claiming, to allay their concerns."

Long-term exposure to hexavalent chromium, also known as chromium 6, in air and drinking water has been linked to cancers in every major organ, to sinus and kidney problems and to other serious diseases.

Chromium 6 was at the core of a case concerning drinking water contamination in Hinkley, Calif., made famous by the movie "Erin Brockovich."

According to state air pollution and

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health specialists, long-term exposure to hexavalent chromium at the levels the AQMD has found on the other side of the TXI plant from "the Hill" could lead to an additional 480 cases of cancer per million people. Agency officials declined to release any data from the neighborhood.

The toxic metal, widely used in metal plating, the aerospace industry and stainless steel processing, can also be found in rocks and other raw material used in cement production.

Sheets said Tuesday that the piles of clinker dust in the factory yard are shipped in from TXI's Oro Grande plant in the high desert. Residents said the plant used to mine in the local area as well. Half of a misshapen, heavily mined mound still looms above the facility, on the other side from "the Hill," whose official name is Crestmore Heights.

Alfonso's youngest son, Edward, 42, still remembers playing "Tom Sawyer" in the giant runoff hole across the street from the cement plant. "I loved growing up here," he said. "We would get ties from the old railroad track, and make rafts in the water."

He and all his neighbors also drank water provided by the cement company, from a well at the edge of the plant's property. Eight years ago they were told that the water was unsafe to drink because of nitrates, and the water supply was shut down.

Sheets said the company closed the well after being told by authorities that the groundwater supplying it contained un-



**DUST:** Mary Alfonso and her husband joked about the white roofs when they moved to the neighborhood 52 years ago.

safe nitrates from fertilizers used by area citrus growers. He said the company had never been told it contained hexavalent chromium. He did not know if it had been tested for that.

Today, Ed Alfonso has renal failure and will be on dialysis for the rest of his life unless he can find a donor for a transplant.

"I was the one who never did drugs, never partied, never drank, and look what happened to me," he said.

Mary Alfonso and other longtime residents said the air quality has actually improved over the decades, thanks to equipment installed at the plant.

Sheets said a state-of-the-art filtration system had been put in decades ago, costing millions, but the improvement most residents probably noticed more occurred when two production lines were shut down in the '70s and '80s.

Socorro Olivas, 77, has lived on "the Hill" for 44 years. Her husband, Manuel, worked at the plant in high school and earned good money.

"But you used to get that burning along the back of your neck, remember?" she said to him Tuesday.

Manuel's father and two uncles also worked there, the couple said. His father died of lung cancer, but he also smoked. Socorro said her brother worked at the plant and had health problems, and her son has asthma.

"We always say there's all this junk in the air, it comes from the air, but we never say where the air comes from," she said.

She said she was angry with AQMD regulators: "We pay their salaries with our taxes, don't we? They should stop protecting this plant and start protecting us, the public."

Across the street, Maria Gonzalez, 63, said she wakes up gasping and choking in the middle of the night. She said she misses her 7-year-old grandson terribly. Her son moved him away after the boy developed serious asthma. Gonzalez said her husband can no longer work because of serious sinus problems.

"From the factory," she said, gesturing to the silos and dirt piles below her quiet street.

"I think the people there, they need to gather all the powder up," she said, making a scooping motion with her hands, then squeezing them shut as if to trap the dust inside. "I love to live here. I want to stay."

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