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County environmental inspections lag

Department is behind on 2,700 mandated visits for checking on hazardous material

By [Jeff McDonald \(/staff/jeff-mcdonald/\)](#) 6 P.M. OCT. 23, 2014 PRINT

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San Diego County regulators have failed to conduct thousands of state-mandated hazardous material inspections at businesses across the region, despite collecting fees that pay for the reviews.

The Department of Environmental Health acknowledged the backlog of more than 2,700 required inspections after U-T Watchdog obtained internal records outlining the problems and a road map to resolving them.

Inspectors also are about 9,500 behind on the department's own internal goals for site visits that go above and beyond what's required by law, officials said.

Director Elizabeth Pozzebon declined to be interviewed about the uncompleted work. She said in prepared responses that her department is working to complete the overdue inspections, which resulted from a change in the way state regulators track environmental-health data.

"We anticipated some delays in inspections due to that additional work and informed industry groups of that likely impact, but we underestimated how much time that transitional work would take," Pozzebon wrote. "Over the past several months, a significant effort has been made to identify program needs and improvement areas."

According to Pozzebon, the delays occurred after state officials required counties to revise the way they process inspection data and other information from licensees.

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She said the statewide effort added to the amount of work counties need to perform, such as adopting new technologies, creating links between local and state data and increasing the amount of required outreach.

Environmental health advocates say regular inspections of businesses that generate hazardous waste are critical to protecting the public from disease or other harm.

“If you don’t do the inspections, businesses are more likely to release hazardous materials and endanger public health and the environment,” said Joy Williams, research director for the Environmental Health Coalition.

The county said it may consider adding staff or funding to meet its inspection requirements. The department currently employs about 280 people full-time and spends about \$44 million a year.

Among other duties, the department is charged with monitoring more than 15,000 businesses that store hazardous materials or create toxic waste that can cause cancer or pose other public-health threats.

The materials range from industrial chemicals and spent motor oil to paint byproducts and used fluorescent light bulbs.

Many of the delayed inspections are required to be performed every year under state law; others are mandated every three years under a state Environmental Protection Agency standard.

State rules require county inspectors to examine underground storage tanks and large-quantity medical waste generators every year. Aboveground petroleum storage tanks, on-site waste treatment and hazardous-materials plans are required to be inspected every three years.

Pozzebon did not specify how many of the 2,766 delayed inspections were supposed to be done annually and how many were due every three years.

The county charges businesses annual fees designed to recover the cost of program compliance, including inspections. The fee can be hundreds of dollars or more, depending on type of facility, the storage or waste generated and the frequency of required inspections.

The department said it is not planning to rebate any of the fees charged to businesses even though thousands of inspections were not done.

“Businesses do not pay for each inspection,” Pozzebon wrote, adding that her program’s fees fund education, outreach and other department functions as well.

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Scott Storms · Owner at Sump-Guard

The state has mandated the implementation of the California Environmental Reporting System (CERS). The amount of work being done to get the correct data loaded to the system is going to take years. I work as a consultant in the same field and we have a hard time with the 70 or so CERS accounts we manage. Having 15000 accounts would be truly overwhelming.

Reply · Like · November 4 at 5:11pm



Mark Mulcahy · Top Commenter · University of Southern California

As a former EH&S officer subject to inspection by many regulators, I can't imagine they would accept similar excuses from me for my failure to comply with the law... I would be subject to fines and legal actions, including possible imprisonment or closing down operations for certain actions or inactions...

Reply · Like · 1 · October 24 at 10:06pm

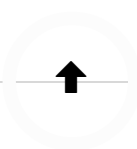


Charles Weir · Top Commenter · Works at Retired

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Reply · Like · Edited · October 24 at 9:32am

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