

August 19, 2015

HUFFPOST LOS ANGELES



Hilda L. Solis

Supervisor for First District in Los Angeles County; former U.S. Secretary of Labor from 2009 to 2013.

Exide Cleanup: The Road Forward

Posted: 08/19/2015 7:29 pm EDT | Updated: 1 hour ago

For 33 years, state regulators allowed the Exide battery recycling plant in Vernon to operate (on a temporary permit!) while repeatedly violating various environmental laws by doing things like transporting corrosive and lead-contaminated material in trailers that leaked hazardous waste onto our roads and highways. The true scale of the environmental harm done to the surrounding communities is just now becoming clear. Though there is significant work to be done in holding Exide and others accountable for what has happened, the absolute first priority is for a thorough and comprehensive cleanup to begin immediately.

Earlier this week, the state's Department of Toxic Substance Control (DTSC) estimated that as many as 1,000 homes may require immediate cleanup (their lead contamination levels are so high that the soil is considered hazardous waste), while up to 10,000 could require cleanup down the road. Since cleaning a single home costs roughly \$40,000, cleaning up this many homes would cost around \$400 million dollars. DTSC concedes this estimate to be accurate. And this doesn't even account for the cleaning needed inside the homes, where lead will have blown in through open windows or vents or have been tracked in on muddy shoes.

It will be tempting for many of the agencies involved to delay cleanup until Exide and other responsible parties are finally compelled to pay the money required to address this environmental injustice. Exide has a stable of high-powered attorneys who can draw that process out for decades. Instead, we need to begin cleanup immediately and task the public's lawyers with getting that money back from the responsible parties later on.

In my view, the best way forward would be for the state to appoint an independent and impartial expert to oversee the cleanup. This expert could begin by working with local, state and federal governments to identify immediately available funding that can be used for a rapid assessment of the impacted communities to identify the homes that need cleanup.

While starting cleanup on the highest priority homes, the expert could, in parallel, bring together every agency with any jurisdiction over this issue to coordinate and implement a comprehensive plan for cleanup and for funding these efforts. Then, as I mentioned before, the lawyers from these agencies can get to work on recovering that money from the responsible parties. To help them in this task, the State should impanel a commission with the ability to get to find out what exactly happened and who is responsible. The public deserves a thorough and independent investigation into what happened and why it was allowed to happen.

This issue is personal to me. My father spent two decades working at a battery recycling plant in City of Industry, and I saw firsthand the lifelong health impacts that resulted. It is imperative that the affected communities be restored to health. Every day that passes, the lead in these houses continues to harm the men, women and children who live there.

It seems inarguable that the institutions charged with protecting these communities failed to fulfill this duty. We must not let this happen again. I am confident that by working together, local, state, and federal leaders can and will address this problem with the urgency it demands.

Follow Hilda L. Solis on Twitter: www.twitter.com/HildaSolis

MORE: [Environment](#) [Green Faith](#) [Exide Battery](#) [Los Angeles County](#) [Los Angeles](#)

Conversations