

**BUSINESS**

# Why metal-treating companies are pushing back against air regulators' methods



24-foot long tanks hold a variety of chemicals used in the anodizing process at EME in Compton on Tuesday, August 22, 2017. EME Inc. has been a metal finishing company in Compton for over 50 years and primarily services the aerospace industry. (Photo by Scott Varley, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

---

By **RACHEL URANGA** | Press-Enterprise

PUBLISHED: August 26, 2017 at 7:07 pm | UPDATED: November 21, 2018 at 12:21 pm

---



The mom-and-pop-size companies who supply aerospace giants with specialized metal parts are now locked in a battle with air regulators who are stepping up their scrutiny of the processes that take place in those structures.

Officials with the South Coast Air Quality Management District believe dozens of metal-finishing firms, many located in suburban communities not far from schools and homes, could be responsible for the release of chromium-6. Long-term exposure to that substance has been linked by medical researchers to lung and nasal cancer.

Regulators are cracking down on some of these companies after discovering the carcinogen at high levels last year near [two metal-finishing companies in Paramount](#), a working-class community in southeast Los Angeles County.

AQMD officials, while continuing stepped-up monitoring of the air near the businesses and expanding the area they're scrutinizing in recent weeks, are considering some of the nation's tightest rules on the release of chromium-6. The Los Angeles County Health Department has also issued directives to facilities where elevated levels of the toxic substance was recorded.

The manufacturers — some of which are smaller, highly specialized, family-run operations that cater to Boeing, Northrop Grumman and other major players in aerospace — see this as an unjustified attack on one of the region's few thriving blue-collar industries.

It's an effort, they say, that could ultimately cost them their livelihood.

"When you lose us, you lose the whole aerospace industry," said Wesley Turnbow, president of the Metal Finishers Association of Southern California and the owner of EME Inc. His Compton business recently became part of the AQMD's growing chromium-6 investigation.

There are about 9,000 jobs in the metal-finishing industry in the state, and more than half of them are in Southern California, according to Turnbow.

The companies are pushing back. They are hiring lawyers and scientists to contest what the South Coast Air Quality Management District sees as an urgent life-saving mission to prevent the spread of a harmful substance.

"Chromium-6 is a known human carcinogen," said Wayne Natri, who heads the district. "It's something we have to address. It's something that not only the community but the Legislature have demanded we look at"



At the heart of the tug-of-war is a question wrapped up in the air quality debate: Just how much of this toxic substance is truly safe for the people who live nearby?

### **What is a safe level?**

Residents of Paramount are worried.

In a community where it's not uncommon to find a metal-finishing company near a school or neighborhood full of families, the substance was detected last year at levels that regulators deemed alarming, spurring the amped-up monitoring programs and the citing of a handful of firms.

In this city, people have reported headaches, nosebleeds and cancer they believe is caused by the toxic compound. Some say the city and regulators ignored their concerns for years.

One group of residents filed a class-action lawsuit against metal-finishing companies, accusing them of endangering their health.

For months, regulators have fanned out across Paramount, staging inspections and issuing citations for violations. Recently, they've expanded their scrutiny to parts of Long Beach and Compton.

But industry officials say AQMD is rushing to judgment. They say regulators are overreacting now despite the fact that small companies have been good neighbors for years and have complied with air-quality directives.

The companies have long been a part of the landscape in these communities.

Turnbow's facility sits on a half a city block squeezed between homes, an electroplating facility and oil tanks. His father purchased it nearly 50 years ago. Over the years, he's installed filters and other devices to prevent the release of any toxics. About 100 workers are employed in the plant and many live in the nearby area.

Inside plants like his, workers perform such specialized tasks as anodizing, a process that makes metal parts used in aerospace a better, more durable fit for their functions. Such processes protect the parts from corrosion, make them last longer against wear and make paints and glues stick to the parts better and longer.

Company officials say they are not bad neighbors. And they say they've worked well with AQMD regulators for years.



“The AQMD is barreling through this process,” said Ryan Hiete, a lawyer who represents more than a dozen metal-finishing companies.

He said the industry will fight increased monitoring.

Hiete also contends air monitors placed by the district outside of the companies pick up chromium-6 from other sources such as construction and diesel trucks.

“They can’t make a standard that is critical to an industry in less than a year,” he said. “It’s putting people out of jobs.”

“(Regulators) have never pushed this hard and fast,” said Turnbow, who fears for the future of his Compton company. “They are scaring people.”

Nastri, who had been criticized early in his tenure for being too friendly to business, disagrees.

“There are always people that are going to try to poke holes (in the science),” he said. “This is not something new to us.”

As for putting people out of jobs, Nastri said, “we all want economic growth and we all want an environment that is safe and healthy for all of us.”

Some metal companies have been willing to work with the district as it drafts these rules, Nastri said, and the agency is considering this.

Anti-toxics activists, meanwhile, want the public’s health protected. “We are putting people in harm’s way,” said Jane Williams, executive director of California Communities Against Toxics, a coalition of environmental justice groups that has been calling for a reduction of emissions at industrial facilities in Paramount since 2013.

### **Where is chromium-6 coming from?**

Where did you first hear about hexavalent chromium? Chances are it was in the Oscar-winning movie “Erin Brockovich,” which detailed the battle waged by Hinkley, Calif., residents after the substance was discovered in their drinking water.

Regulators found chromium-6 last year at nearly 300 times the normal level in Paramount. Air officials were caught off guard by the alarmingly high readings and traced them back to two metal companies.



Despite a 2013 study from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health that found that the [chemical is the most common way in which chromium-6 is released](#), the tanks were never regulated by the district.

“This is a potent carcinogen. You don’t want to be exposed to it if you can avoid it,” said Emma Cheuse, an attorney with Earthjustice, which pushed the Environmental Protection Agency to impose stricter emissions standards on chrome-plating facilities some years back.

### **Fighting AQMD’s methods**

This isn’t the first time the metal-processing industry has faced scrutiny in Southern California.

During the late 1980s, high concentrations of the toxic substance were found around an elementary school in Bell Gardens, next to metal-plating plants.

The incident pushed the district to impose pollution controls after the school district reported several teachers had suffered miscarriages.

Then, in 2002, a plating facility in the Barrio Logan neighborhood of San Diego was shut down because of high concentration of hexavalent chromium in the air.

Over the past year, the AQMD has identified about 1,200 facilities that fit a toxic profile similar to those facilities found in Paramount and has said it will look to eventually monitor all of these sites.

But the metal-finishers’ association and others in the industry take issue with the district’s tactics.

So far, three companies have been ordered to curtail operations causing the toxics release, most recently Lubeco Inc. in North Long Beach.

Regulators recorded readings of chromium-6 at 18 times normal levels at the facility between May 13 and July 12. The readings averaged 1.07 nanograms per cubic meter. That’s compared with the basin average of 0.6 nanograms per cubic meter.

The district is developing a proposal that could force companies to conduct and pay for monitoring if levels of hexavalent chromium are detected in nearby air above 1 nanogram per cubic meter.

That trigger level being considered is way too low for some in the industry. “That’s



Hiete points out other agencies, such as the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment of California, set exposure-level limits at 200 nanograms per cubic meter.

Even at that level, the agency said adverse health effects are unlikely to occur in the general population when exposed continuously over a lifetime.

But the same agency considers chromic acid, a form of chromium-6 often found in metal anodizing and plating shops, far more harmful and considers exposure above 2 nanograms a health risk.

Hiete said the district has gone too far in its enforcement actions.

The association believes that 200 nanograms per cubic meter is an “absolutely safe level” based on detailed industry evaluations.

“They (AQMD officials) are using their bully pulpit to say all these companies are dangerous,” he said. “These are draconian standards.”

But many don't agree.

Congresswoman Nannette Barragan, a Democrat whose district runs from Compton to San Pedro, recently asked Gov. Jerry Brown to increase funding to expand toxic testing.

And Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn, who also represents the area, said she isn't swayed by the associations' arguments.

“Regulatory agencies cannot and will not bow to industry pressure when public health is on the line,” she said.

Earthjustice attorney Cheuse was just as blunt.

“People should not have to breathe and take in a cancer-causing chemical,” she said, “just because they live, work and go to school near industrial facilities.”

Let's talk business.

**Catch up on the business news closest to you with our daily newsletter.**

Enter your email to subscribe



Tags: [environment](#), [Top Stories OCR](#), [Top Stories PE](#)



**Rachel Uranga**



SPONSORED CONTENT

**Man Left Christmas Gift From Ex-Girlfriend Unopened, Finally Opens It 47 Years Later... [↗](#)**

By Brain-Sharper



Adrian Pearce kept a Christmas gift that an old girlfriend had given him for such a long time that by the time he...

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

## Join the Conversation

We invite you to use our commenting platform to engage in insightful conversations about issues in our community. Although we do not pre-screen comments, we reserve the right at all times to remove any information or materials that are unlawful, threatening, abusive, libelous, defamatory, obscene, vulgar, pornographic, profane, indecent or otherwise objectionable to us, and to disclose any information necessary to satisfy the law, regulation, or government request. We might permanently block any user who abuses these conditions.



pulling down on the arrow that appears. Or, contact our editors by emailing [moderator@scng.com](mailto:moderator@scng.com).

