

Contra Costa County officials descend on illegal waste operations in North Richmond

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NORTH RICHMOND -- Contra Costa County environmental, fire and legal officials swept through three illegal waste transfer stations early Friday morning, gathering photographs and other evidence in an effort to halt operations.

The surprise inspections came after three months of investigation by county Environmental Health and supporting agencies, which identified at least 10 illegal waste transfer stations in North Richmond, Richmond and nearby communities.

A team including officials from Environmental Health, the Contra Costa Fire Department and Sheriff's Office, the District Attorney's Office and County Supervisor John Gioia dropped in on an illegal transfer station at 789 Market Ave. Behind steel fencing more than 8 feet high, workers had separated tons of waste into piles of electronics, metals, wood and concrete. Ten 55-gallon drums of toxic liquids were clustered in the corner, a few paces from the railroad tracks.

"It's the wild West out here in terms of waste disposal," said deputy district attorney Gary Koeppel, surveying the huge debris piles.

Workers scattered and trucks fell idle soon after the inspection team arrived. One man stayed behind and confirmed to the inspectors the identity of the site's owner but was unable to reach him by phone.

"It's lucrative, and they think they can get away with it," Koeppel said. The goal, he said, was to stop work as soon as possible and gather the evidence to pursue civil and criminal actions against the owners.

Illegal waste transfer stations have been a problem in West County and particularly in North Richmond for years. Late-night dumping has plagued the community, which dumpers target because of its proximity to the Golden Bear Transfer Station and its

concentration of dark streets, vacant lots and narrow alleys.

Meanwhile, unlicensed and unregulated transfer operations have sprung up, driven by the high costs of disposal and high yield for many materials, especially metals. The illegal transfer stations strip out the profitable materials, which they sell to recyclers and others, then have strong incentives to illegally dump the byproducts, including toxic materials, rather than pay for proper disposal. Operations can release pollutants into the air, soil and groundwater.

At a second inspection site Friday, at 850 Brookside Drive, officials discovered an illegal waste-transfer operation hidden behind a tow yard. The yard manager said the space behind his business was subleased, but he had no knowledge of whether it was legal.

Workers sorting trash with forklifts and other heavy equipment scattered when the inspectors arrived. Who was responsible for the operation was not immediately apparent. The heavy odors of solvents and other toxics permeated the outdoor yard.

"We just learned about this one yesterday through a tip," said Agnes Vinluan, a county environmental health specialist. "There's a lot more we have to investigate here before we fully understand."

Gioia said the impetus for the multiagency effort is public and environmental health.

"It's a serious public health and environmental problem," he said. "All of what we're doing here is about ensuring that waste is properly disposed of. This is the stuff that winds up being dumped in our communities. Closure or compliance is what we want."

Environmental Health officials said at least one operator was recently found burning garbage, and a fire occurred at another nearby site in October.

Notices have been sent to operators and the property owners, Gioia said, and follow-up inspections will be done to ensure they are shut down. If not, the District Attorney's Office will move ahead with criminal or civil prosecutions. More inspections will be conducted in the coming days.

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