

State's toxic releases post 50% gain, EPA says

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A truck exits Chemical Waste Management Inc.'s hazardous-waste landfill near Kettleman City. The landfill was among the state's top five emitters of toxic chemicals in 2013. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times)

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Toxic releases in California rose 50% for 2013, mostly due to disposal at a Kern County waste facility

The amount of toxic chemicals released in California jumped 50% in 2013 over the year before because of a surge in disposal by the state's largest polluter, a hazardous-waste landfill in Kern County, according to data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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Clean Harbors Inc.'s Buttonwillow landfill reported disposing of more than 11 million pounds of copper and related compounds in 2013, a more than sixfold increase over the previous year.

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The influx to the landfill, about 25 miles west of Bakersfield, came from facilities that generate copper-contaminated sludge, soil and fluids, including wastewater treatment plants, cleanup sites, mining operations and geothermal power plants, said Phillip Retallick, Clean Harbors' senior vice president for compliance.

The numbers were made public this month in a U.S. EPA database called the [Toxics Release Inventory](#), which tracks large industrial facilities' emissions of chemicals that pose a risk to human health and the environment. Under the program, a "release" occurs when a chemical is emitted into the air, water or disposed of in a landfill.

The EPA's annual inventory for 2013, the most recent year available, showed that toxic releases nationwide rose 15% over the year before, mostly from mining. But toxic releases have decreased over the last decade because of declining air pollution from power plants, the EPA reported.

California ranked 41st in the nation in toxic releases, with only about 1% of the nationwide total, the EPA's analysis found. The emissions, which are self-reported by industry, typically fluctuate with the economy.

The Buttonwillow landfill disposed of 26.9 million pounds of toxic waste in 2013, enough to drive up the state's total releases to 47.6 million pounds from 31.8 million the year before, EPA officials said.

Retallick acknowledged that the company was largely responsible for the increase, but complained that it is somewhat misleading for the EPA to classify the waste it disposes of in landfills as toxic releases.

"Receipt of this waste has been done in compliance with our permit rules and regulations and there have been no releases to the environment," he said. "It's being placed into a properly secured and regulated landfill."

The increase in copper waste did not come up during a recent inspection of the Buttonwillow landfill, said Jared Blumenfeld, administrator for the EPA's Pacific Southwest region.

"It does pique our interest, and certainly where we see big spikes it helps target our enforcement actions," Blumenfeld said.

By providing "high-level data that tells the public what's going in and out of facilities right next to them," Blumenfeld said, the inventory can lead to greater scrutiny from neighbors, journalists and pollution regulators and motivate companies to adopt cleaner practices.

EPA data show California's other top emitters of toxic chemicals in 2013 were the Mesquite Mine in Imperial County; the Chemical Waste Management Inc. hazardous-waste landfill near Kettleman City; Quemetco Inc., a lead-acid battery recycler in Industry; and Chevron's El Segundo Refinery.

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