



NEWS



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Synagro waste fire fuels 144% air-complaint spike in Mojave Desert; \$1M fines on table

By Charlie McGee, VVDAILYPRESS.COM

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A green-branded waste handler is driving a surge of air-contaminant complaints in California's Mojave Desert, dwarfing more than 1,400 peer polluters as locals say a seven-week fire at an 80-acre waste pit keeps tainting their air.

Synagro Technologies Inc., a Maryland firm acquired in late 2020 by an investing arm of Wall Street giant Goldman Sachs Group Inc., is the alleged culprit in two-thirds of all formal complaints the Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District received in the first six months of this year, according to documents obtained by the Daily Press via public-records requests.

The regulator's response thus far: two nuisance citations in two months posing a bit less than \$1 million in fines unless Synagro strikes settlements promising to fix problems for lower penalties.

A total of 301 complaints had been filed by civilians or outside agencies to the AQMD this year as of June 28, regardless of the Mojave Desert facility in question. That's a 144% spike from the same period a year ago when the air regulator logged 96 complaints district-wide.

Fueling the rise is a two-month fire in Synagro's open-air pit of human feces, wood, brewery muck, and more trucked in from across Southern California. It sits roughly eight miles downwind of Hinkley, the unincorporated town best known for decades of water contamination that cost Pacific Gas and Electric a \$333 million settlement and won Julia Roberts an Oscar for "Erin Brockovich."

The AQMD got 196 complaints citing Synagro alone as the alleged source of erratic ailments and noxious air between May 28 to June 28, the waste-pit blaze's first month.

That's nearly triple the number of complaints in the prior five months of this year against all of the more than 1,430 active-permit facilities district-wide, from small emitters like grocery stores to heavy-hitters such as the Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow. Only 67 complaints against any facility had hit the AQMD docket this year before the ongoing Synagro fire, a Daily Press analysis of data provided by the district found.

The mass complaints since late May echo fears that dozens of High Desert residents have expressed in interviews with the Daily Press and hundreds more in private Facebook groups since the current blaze began.

For years, earlier records show people ringing alarm bells about smaller, still-disruptive blazes in the Synagro pit.

"I commute from Barstow to Tehachapi every day on Highway 58," one person wrote in a complaint on Dec. 21, 2020, "(and) the waste processing company has been burning the waste. You can see the smoke, and it smells so terrible that I literally have to cover my nose and mouth. This can not be safe to breathe. It makes me nauseous every day."

'Trying our best'

Synagro's second violation for the current waste fire came last week, in a July 14 notice, for "continuing to discharge quantities of air contaminants which cause a nuisance." AQMD spokesman Martial Haprov said this represents "a separate violation in addition to the original nuisance violation" issued in a June 1 notice.

Synagro faces a potential civil penalty of \$210,000 for the latest violation, adding to a \$765,000 penalty it may face for the initial citation on June 1, a few days after the fire began.

Layne Baroldi, Synagro's vice president of technical services and government affairs, says the company has a tentative meeting date next week, on July 27, to negotiate terms for settling the air regulator's newest notice. He didn't mention the surge in AQMD complaints or company efforts tied to the June 1 citation. Still, Synagro and the air district have indicated settlement talks are ongoing for both violations, limiting what either can say publicly.

"We're trying our best to mitigate the — I wouldn't want to say nuisance, but you know, any trouble that we're causing," Baroldi said on a call Wednesday. "We want to be good community members, and we're trying our hardest."

The air regulator says that both violations remain under investigation, meaning no penalty is finalized.

'Need to be shut down'

The Mojave Desert AQMD covers California's second-largest landmass of 35 air-regulating districts: more than 20,000 square miles of San Bernardino County's High Desert and Riverside County's Palo Verde Valley, home to well above half-a-million people and many rich biospheres.

The AQMD didn't provide records beyond June 28, but the volume of complaints against Synagro has likely ballooned further this month. Reports of health disruptions and rancid smells resurged to perhaps the worst level yet a bit more than a week ago in Barstow, roughly two-dozen miles east of the compost facility.

The complaints also reflect a trend that's been clear on the ground: reported health problems spiking with days of northeast-bound solid winds and foul air getting more pungent at night.

The largest single-day count of complaints against Synagro came on June 18, when the AQMD got 40 new reports alleging problems caused by the fire. Another 55 complaints came in the following three days. This weekend marked one of the worst periods of anecdotal evidence for Synagro-fire effects as far as 60 miles north in Fort Irwin and three-dozen miles east in Yermo.

Another spike of complaints came with the fire's initial eruption, starting with three complaints on May 28. The following four days, May 29 to June 1, added 48 new complaints to the Synagro docket.

Many residents have said they're frustrated by not knowing how to complain about the officially-dubbed Nursery Products Hawes Composting Facility, a mile south of State Route 58 at 14479 Cougar Road, which Synagro bought in late 2016. Others recently learned they could file air-quality complaints using an online form on the AQMD's website.

But some locals were familiar enough with the complaint-filing process that they recognized the current blaze as a problem before any government agency or private entity had publicly acknowledged its existence.

"THE HUMAN WASTE PIT ON HWY 58 IS EVIDENTLY ON FIRE AGAIN," wrote one of the nine people who filed a Synagro complaint on May 29, two days before the Daily Press published the first public report of the blaze. "THE SMOKE IS BLOWING ALL THE WAY TO MY HOUSE (...) MY WIFE AND I BOTH HAVE HEADACHES FROM IT."

The May 29 complainant added that this isn't the first such incident.

"A FEW MONTHS AGO MY SON WHO WORKS FOR (redacted) CAME BY THE PLANT WHEN IT WAS ON FIRE," they wrote. "HE WAS SICK FOR TWO DAYS. THIS PLANT NEEDS TO BE SHUT DOWN."

Haprov, the AQMD spokesman, said numerous residents have asked his agency to close the Synagro site down but emphasized that it doesn't have the authority to take such an action. "We don't permit or regulate the facility as a whole," he said. "We only permit equipment used in their operation."

The air district regulates the use of equipment with potential for harmful emissions, and it has the power to deem any entity a nuisance for “interfering with our ambient air quality,” but oversight of the actual composting operations of Synagro lies with San Bernardino County Department of Public Health’s Environmental Health Services division.

‘I have not seen it this bad’

The district redacted names, addresses, and contact details of complaint filers to protect their privacy in its disclosures to the Daily Press.

“Each complaint that comes in is entered as a new complaint regardless if it is the same person complaining multiple times,” Haprov said in an email, meaning there’s a chance two or more complaints have been filed by the same person at different times.

A variety of writing styles and personal details indicate that at least the majority of complainants aren’t repeated filers, though.

The 196 complaints against Synagro in the first month of its fire represent about 84% of all complaints received by the Mojave District district during that period.

Five complaints had already been filed earlier this year against the Synagro site. One came on Jan. 6, in which the complainant said they’d filed a similar report with photos in 2021 and were “told the facility was within compliance multiple times.”

“All the week, the smoke from the composite/sewage pile is visible from my place of work 7 miles north,” the complaint reads. “At night, the (...) ‘sewage’ smelling smoke falls to ground level. Typically it travels east to almost Hinkley and north to harper dry lake.”

On the morning of Jan. 6, according to the complainant, the smell became noticeable as far as the eastern portion of Barstow.

“I have not seen it this bad,” they wrote. “In past AQMD seems to respond on warmer days when smoke travels upward. This smoke falls to the ground in the early morning (before 6AM) and blankets the valley floor.”

Records from prior years show even earlier waste-pit blazes have motivated at least a few people to seek a crackdown.

These earlier Synagro fires went unnoticed by almost everyone aside from government regulators, Hinkley residents, and workers whose jobs brought them within miles of the facility.

Multiple trends persist in the alleged effects of both old and ongoing fires cited by the complaints: An inability to stay outside long enough for standard activities like jogging or front-porch reading; respiratory problems, headaches, nausea, and more unusual illnesses in children; fears that potentially harmful emissions from the waste-pit blaze aren’t being fully monitored and documented.

“You’re not correct about Barstow air quality,” one complainant wrote on June 18, referencing an AQMD web page meant to represent real-time air quality at various hubs in the Mojave Desert. “It’s horrible tonight. The smoke woke me up.”

Haprov said “our Barstow-area monitor, the regulated monitor, only measures a finite number of pollutants,” which could exclude emissions from the waste-pit fire. The AQMD monitor covers three specific kinds of emissions, which he specified as: nitrogen dioxide, ground-level ozone, and the specific form of particulate matter known as PM10.

“We don’t want to say there’s something in the air that’s toxic that we’re not measuring,” he said. “What we are saying is what we’re measuring in the air is not elevated. It is safe to say that anything combusting is generally not great to breathe.”

‘I wouldn’t say it’s burning, per se’

The sewage-composting giant has taken a far brighter tone than residents when describing the nature of the blaze and its effects beyond the roofless factory’s state-and county- and locally permitted property lines.

“I think it’s actually gone about as well as can be expected given the circumstances,” Baroldi said June 10, a bit more than two weeks into the fire. “I wouldn’t say it’s burning, per se. There is a slight smoldering, but it’s night-and-day from when we had the horrible winds.”

In its first public statement on the ongoing fire, a June 2 Facebook post, Synagro said, “We expect to be managing hot spots over the next week or so.”

A similar estimate came two days earlier from **San Bernardino County Fire** Battalion Chief Mike McClintock, who told the Daily Press his department stepped back to a monitoring role within a day of being called to the fire on May 28.

“The local fire department has deemed this as not an emergency and has handed the mitigation over to us,” Synagro stated in its June 2 post, “because we have the proper equipment and plan to manage the fire, and it cannot spread any further than our site.”

When the Synagro fire hit the one-month mark, it showed little sign of slowing on mid-afternoon visits by the Daily Press, with multi-colored clouds of smoke and helicopter water drops still visible from at least a mile away.

The company and its third-party firefighting contractors provided a new estimate in late June: two weeks for the fire to be quelled.

Last Saturday, when the fire turned seven weeks old, Hinkley resident Deborah Fox drove by the fire shortly after 7:30 a.m. to visit her daughter out of the county. She took numerous photos from State Route 58, which show exclusively black smoke emanating in thick clouds from the waste pit. On her way home around 3:30 p.m., she took more that showed black, white, and red-tinted clouds emanating from different parts of the pit.

Residents hoped a monsoon that brought rain over the open-air pit Monday would be a deus ex machina from nature. Instead, multi-colored smoke emanated when the sky cleared across the mud-like mounds of waste with little sign of slowing. A few Hinkley residents say the smell worsened that night and into the morning.

Baroldi gave a new estimate Wednesday that the fire is just days from being quelled.

“We’ve got literally, as of today, I’d say we’ve got the smoldering to 95% out,” he said. “We anticipate having everything out by the end of the week.”

A recent county-inspection report says, “two inoperable water trucks (at the Synagro site) were unable to assist in getting the fire out while it was small,” the Daily Press reported on July 13.

Years of unresolved problems on the public record add to local questions about what may be in the air for northern High Desert residents, and in the compost, Synagro sends to farms that feed America.

San Bernardino County inspectors issued 39 violations in 18 visits to the Synagro site from November 2020 to April this year, dwarfing its 11 peer facilities in California, the Daily Press reported in a June 19 analysis of government disclosures. It added three violations in its routine inspection on May 26, two days before the fire began, including taking hundreds of tons beyond the daily maximum of waste allowed by its permit.

Violations before the current waste-pit blaze include a surprise check on March 23, finding more than five times the legal limit of film plastic in a ready-to-go Synagro compost load, and brewery muck from an Anheuser-Busch factory near Los Angeles being trucked in since at least March 2021 — despite inspectors noting this usually is considered “food waste,” which the site isn’t permitted to take.

<https://www.vvdailypress.com/story/news/2022/07/21/synagro-waste-fire-fuels-144-spike-mojave-desert-air-complaints/10092944002/>

Lake Havasu City, AZ: Dive team rescue training was conducted last Thursday at Lake Havasu

By Staff Writer, ZACHNEWS.NET

Posted: July 21, 2022



Lake Havasu City, Arizona: Deputies from the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department's Colorado River Station and Mohave County Sheriff's Office, along with officers from the Lake Havasu City Police Department, firefighters from the San Bernardino County Fire District and crews from Air Methods Care Flight conducted dive team rescue training on Thursday, July 21st, 2022 at Lake Havasu.

According to a press release from the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department's Colorado River Station, this training consisted of a water rescue of a drowning victim in Copper Canyon, Lake Havasu. The divers went to depths of 30 feet under water with poor visibility. The divers were tasked with locating a staged fake drowning victim as quickly as possible. Divers from different agencies teamed up to rescue the victim.

San Bernardino County Fire Department simulated lifesaving measures on a recovered mannequin while Air Methods Care Flight landed in the area. The mannequin was then loaded into Care Flight's helicopter for medical transport.

This training is vital in the execution of a water rescue. There were approximately 30 first responders from different agencies involved in the training. All agencies involved are dedicated to making the waterways safer for the public on the Colorado River.

For more both safety tips including my life jacket rules check out the following websites:

- California Department of Boating and Waterways:
- https://dbw.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=28711
- California Department of Parks and Recreation:
- https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=28985
- Arizona State Parks and Trails:
- <https://azstateparks.com/boating-safety>

Thanks to San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department's Colorado River Station, Mohave County Sheriff's Office, Lake Havasu City Police Department, **San Bernardino County Fire District** and Air Methods Care Flight for participating in the dive team rescue training.

<https://zachnews.net/2022/07/22/lake-havasu-city-az-dive-team-rescue-training-was-conducted-last-thursday-at-lake-havasu/>

Carousel Mall in downtown San Bernardino to be demolished; A contract could be awarded in October, at which time a cost estimate and timeline would be available

By Brian Whitehead, SBSUN.COM

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A man walks by an entrance to the abandoned Carousel Mall in downtown San Bernardino on Monday, May 16, 2022 after a three-alarm fire damaged units inside the mall. (Photo by Watchara Phomicinda, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

The Carousel Mall in downtown San Bernardino will be demolished earlier than expected, as city leaders on Wednesday, July 20, moved along a plan to solicit interest from firms willing to do the job. A contract could be awarded in October, at which time a cost estimate and timeline will be available.

The city intends to recover demolition costs in the eventual sale of the 43-acre mall property, City Manager Rob Field told elected officials Wednesday.

Council members Theodore Sanchez, Sandra Ibarra, Juan Figueroa, Fred Shorett, Kimberly Calvin and Damon Alexander approved the move. Councilman Ben Reynoso opposed. Abandoned since closing five years ago, the Carousel Mall has required emergency attention in recent months due to fires started by intruders.

A three-alarm blaze in May prompted Mayor John Valdivia to place a proposal before his colleagues expediting the demolition process. The plan was dismissed due to lack of support.

Wednesday, the City Council reversed course.

“A lot of it has to do with we don’t have to worry about John using this as an opportunity to shakedown every demolition firm in the Western Hemisphere for money and plague the entire process,” Sanchez said in a phone interview following the meeting. “Knowing Valdivia is no longer a component that is going to poison the water that is the process of picking a demolition firm to demolish this mall, an enormous undertaking, really, that’s the material change that happened here.”

Valdivia officially lost his bid for reelection this month, finishing third behind Helen Tran and Jim Penman in the mayor’s race.

Tran and Penman will square off in the November election. Valdivia, who has repeatedly referred to his colleagues as a “do-nothing council,” thanked them Wednesday for expediting the demolition process.

“That’s great council,” he said after the vote. “We got something done here tonight.”

In addition to streamlining demolition, city leaders agreed to a \$40,000-per-month contract with San Bernardino-based Redwood Private Security for around-the-clock patrol of the property.

Redwood will have morning, afternoon and evening shifts, and conduct interior sweeps of the mall three times a day to remove trespassers. While San Bernardino will fund the 24/7 patrol initially, the costs will be passed onto the firm ultimately chosen to raze the place, Field said.

Redwood is expected to begin patrolling Aug. 1, and will continue through the end of the demolition.

“I don’t think adding more personnel will entirely do away with all transient and criminal activity happening at the mall property,” Sanchez said, “but it will curb a lot of it.”

<https://www.sbsun.com/2022/07/21/carousel-mall-in-downtown-san-bernardino-to-be-demolished/>