



NEWS RELEASE



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State Investigation Finds No Common Cause for Birth Defects

SACRAMENTO -- A comprehensive state investigation by the California Environmental Protection Agency (Cal/EPA) and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) into the environmental and health conditions in Kettleman City did not find a conclusive cause for the recent birth defects in the area.

“While we wish there was an explanation for what caused the birth defects experienced by the children we studied in Kettleman City,” said CDPH Director Dr. Mark Horton, “our investigation finds that no common health or environmental factor links the cases.”

“This investigation was an unprecedented effort by Cal/EPA, CDPH and U.S. EPA to focus on specific environmental health concerns within an individual community,” said Cal/EPA Secretary for Linda Adams. “While we did not find an environmental cause for these birth defects, our scientists produced information that addresses many of the community’s environmental health concerns.”

The comprehensive review included case review of eleven children born with major structural birth defects, interviews with six of the eleven mothers of children born with those defects as well as air, soil and water monitoring in the community and at the nearby Chemical Waste Management Kettleman Hills hazardous waste facility. Despite extensive outreach to the families, three of the eleven mothers declined to take part and two could not be reached. The review did not find a cause for the birth defects, but it did recommend steps for monitoring and improving some environmental conditions in the community.

The results of the investigation and recommended actions are detailed in a draft report released today in both English and Spanish by Cal/EPA and CDPH.

In January, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger directed the two agencies to investigate possible causes of the birth defects in Kettleman City. The two state agencies are accepting written comments on the draft report and will conduct a public meeting in Kettleman City on December 2, 2010 to get community input on the report before it is finalized in December.

CDPH examined the state’s registry for the rate of birth defects from 1987 to 2008. It also reviewed the cases of 11 children identified as born with major structural birth defects between 2007 and March 31 of this year and interviewed mothers who were willing to participate. While more children were born with birth defects in 2008 and 2009 than would be expected for an area of that size, no clear trend of increasing birth defects in the area was identified.

Cal/EPA monitored and sampled air, soil, and water in the community and at the nearby Chemical Waste Management Kettleman Hills hazardous waste facility. The Cal/EPA Kettleman City Environmental Exposure Assessment was led by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) and involved scientists from the California Air Resources Board (ARB), the Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR), the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC), and the State Water Resources Control Board.

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency provided technical consultation and oversaw the analysis of some of the environmental samples.

Although there is no indication that environmental conditions in Kettleman City are linked to the birth defects, the draft report recommends ongoing monitoring of environmental conditions in Kettleman City.

“We made a commitment to the people of Kettleman City to find out what is in their air, water and soil,” said OEHHA Director Dr. Joan Denton. “In doing so, we generally found pollution levels in Kettleman City to be similar to those found elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley. We identified several steps that should be taken to address chemicals present in the community.”

The recommendations include:

- The State will continue its plan for statewide assessments of chlorpyrifos and diazinon, and mitigation for MITC.
- Regulatory agencies will continue efforts to reduce arsenic levels in Kettleman City’s drinking water either through improved treatment or a new source of water. This will reduce risks of other health effects related to arsenic. Current levels are not high enough to indicate birth defects.
- While lead was detected in the school and municipal wells, the findings were not consistent with previous tests of the well water. Regulatory agencies will conduct follow-up sampling to verify whether there is lead in the water from two wells. Lead can cause other health problems, but it is not a known cause of birth defects.
- Air officials will investigate benzene emissions from a treatment unit at Kettleman City’s southwest drinking water well. If the regional air district confirms these findings, the state will work with the district to consider corrective actions.
- Further testing and possible cleanup may be needed at the home where chlordane was found in the yard.

Although some birth defects shared similar features, for instance, cleft palate, CDPH found that the infants with birth defects had different underlying conditions. The types of birth defects identified were common types of birth defects.

The CDPH report also examined cancer rates for the census tract of the area of the State that includes Kettleman City. It found cancer rates overall were statistically lower than what would be expected for a similar population. However, among children less than 15 years of age, there were five cancers diagnosed during a 12-year period, while fewer than three childhood cancers would be anticipated. Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia comprised the majority of these childhood cancers. The children with Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia resided in areas of the census tract other than Kettleman City.

“While overall cancers rates in the area are lower than what would be expected based on statistical averages,” said Director Horton, “we will continue to monitor cancer activity, especially childhood cancers.”

The draft report is being distributed throughout the Kettleman City community, including copies available at the local post office, library, and elementary school. The report is also posted online at www.calepa.ca.gov/EnvJustice/News/ and at www.cdph.ca.gov. Cal/EPA and CDPH are accepting written comments on the report until December 21, 2010.