

Radioactive waste may be in East Bay parks



Sherry Padgett visits the site of a proposed residential development in Richmond in 2020. Padgett says the former Zeneca and Stauffer Chemical Co. site is still contaminated with hazardous materials.

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By Tara Duggan

Decades ago, Stauffer Chemical Co. dumped hazardous waste into several East Bay locations, including two places known to have radioactive material. But the extent of the disposal sites, and the fact that they also occurred at what are now public parks, became widely known only last year, according to a report in the Los Angeles Times.

Last year, the California Department of Toxic Substances Control shared a letter dated March 28, 1980, with several other state and federal agencies that showed the chemical company had dumped a total of over 50,000 tons of industrial waste in previous decades at two

Richmond sites as well as in landfills in Benicia, Albany and Berkeley, the latter two at locations that are now covered by parks, according to the report.

It was already known that Stauffer had dumped hazardous waste, including radioactive material, at the site of its Richmond plant, now known as the Zeneca site for the company that took over after it closed, and the nearby Blair landfill. But it was not previously disclosed that Stauffer had dumped 11,100 tons of waste in each of two landfills that are now covered by César Chávez Park in Berkeley and Albany Bulb, a park and public art space, and 3,700 tons in Benicia, according to the Department of Toxic Substances Control.

“DTSC is aware of radioactive material discovered at the Blair landfill and Zeneca/former Stauffer Chemical sites, but is unaware of whether radioactive material was disposed of at other sites,” said Russ Edmondson, media information officer at the department, in an email.

Though the letter was in Department of Toxic Substances Control archives, the agency had not shared it previously with other agencies, and neither representatives from San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board nor city officials in Berkeley and Albany were aware that the chemical company had dumped waste there, the Times reported.

“The project has been investigated since the 1980s and multiple agencies and staff have been involved over the years,” Edmondson said. He also said that laws passed in the 1970s and 1980s increased requirements for generators of hazardous waste to notify landfills and the public of hazardous waste disposal, and that the water board oversaw the early stages of cleanup at Stauffer’s Richmond plant in the 1980s to 2000s.

In January, the water board instructed the cities of Berkeley and Albany to test their landfills for contaminants and radiation after learning that the sites historically received industrial waste, according to letters obtained by the Chronicle.

Blair Robertson, public information officer at the water board, said that the landfills are regulated by the board to ensure that waste discharges don’t impact surface or groundwater quality.

“Currently the board has no information to suggest that the sites pose a risk to water quality or human health,” Robertson said.

For that reason, Berkeley does not plan to close César Chávez Park but will test it for “historical materials as a precautionary measure,” said Matthai Chakko, communications manager for the city, in an email.

The city of Albany did not respond to a request for comment.

Stauffer built a plant on the Richmond shoreline in 1897 to produce sulfuric acid, and later manufactured fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides there. In the 1980s, the site was purchased by Zeneca Corp., now known as AstraZeneca, which also produced chemicals and dumped hazardous materials.

Sherry Padgett, a Richmond Shoreline resident, business owner and environmental activist, said community groups had long suspected that Stauffer dumped waste beyond Richmond, based on records of the amount of raw material that was brought to the manufacturing site versus the amount of product that was shipped out.

“The records were like ghosts as to where the rest of the materials had been transplanted,” she said in an interview with the Chronicle. “We didn’t know how much or what type of material was taken from the plant.”

Though the content of the industrial waste buried below the Berkeley and Albany parks is unknown, previous testing on dumping locations at the Stauffer property and the nearby Blair landfill showed that they contained heavy metals including lead, volatile organic compounds such as benzene, and radioactive substances. High levels of radioactivity from alum mud, a byproduct of the production of sulfuric acid, were first detected at the Blair landfill location in 2011, according to the Times.

“We knew that alum mud dumped at Blair landfill was radioactive for 13 years,” said Padgett. “Our regulators have been turtles. They’ve just been moving at a very slow pace in getting this cleaned up.”

Richmond Shoreline Alliance and other community and environmental groups sued the city of Richmond in 2021 over a developer’s proposal to build 4,000 units of housing and a grocery store on the Zeneca site, after the Department of Toxic Substances Control announced it would do a partial cleanup of the area before construction. The groups wanted the city to go through with a previous plan to do a full cleanup of the site’s contaminated soil before building. The case is under appeal.

Janet Johnson of the Richmond Shoreline Alliance said the news about Stauffer disposal sites in Albany and Berkeley was “horrifying.”

“Instead of cleaning it up they want to cover it up,” she said of the Department of Toxic Substances Control, including both the current situation and previous ones with the Zeneca site.

Johnson recommended that people who are concerned by what is now known about the César Chávez Park and Albany Bulb get organized.

“This is not going to change until the person who’s walking their dog down there gets together with everybody else and demands accountability,” she said.

Reach Tara Duggan: tduggan@sfnchronicle.com; Twitter: [@taraduggan](https://twitter.com/taraduggan)