

Water contamination in Maywood, California

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Maywood, California in Los Angeles County is one of many US cities suffering from a lack of access to one of the most basic requirements of modern society: clean drinking water.

The city faces a serious health threat arising from high concentration of contaminants in its water supplies. Although residents have long complained and raised the issue with local and state politicians, conditions still remain unacceptable under any health standard.

For decades, the small city of Maywood, California has been home to thousands of working class families. Industrial development began in the 20s, first with the Chrysler Corporation, then with Willys-Overland Motors, famous for Jeep production. During World War II, Lockheed ran war machinery production.

In the aftermath of WWII, industrial production flourished in several sectors, including aerospace, furniture manufacture, and food processing. But from the 1970s on, many of these industries were shut down. Decades of plant closings and mass layoffs transformed Maywood, now overwhelmingly populated by Latino immigrants and their children, into an impoverished city.

The city has also been plagued by corruption and scandals. In 2010, on the verge of bankruptcy, the city fired most of its employees and disbanded its police department.

The main body of law currently in governing water quality is the federal Clean Water Act of 1977. Amendments were enacted as part of the Water Quality Act of 1987. In addition, groundwater protection was established in the Safe Drinking Water Act, Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, and the Superfund Act. Within this framework, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is tasked with setting

standards for drinking water quality and oversees the states, localities, and water suppliers who implement those standards.

Despite these laws, thousands of chemicals are still contained in drinking water. Many are regulated on the basis of what was limited knowledge of health risks at the time of the legislation. Others are not regulated at all by any of these laws.

For example, there is no health standard for manganese, which is found in high levels in Maywood water. Manganese in high concentrations can disrupt the nervous system and create Parkinson-like symptoms. Water contaminated by manganese is also discolored, and as many working families in the city can attest to from direct experience, foul-smelling and tasting.

Lead has also been found in Maywood water at levels above health risk guidelines, albeit within legal requirements.

Radioactive contaminants above health guidelines are also found in Maywood water, in particular Alpha particles (a form of radiation released from mining waste pollutants and natural sources) and Radium-228 (a radioactive element usually found around uranium deposits).

Another chemical contained in Maywood's water supply is a solvent called trichloroethylene, or TCE. A byproduct of industrial waste, TCE is now known to cause serious central nervous system issues as well as toxic effects on the liver and kidney. It has been found to cause cancer, as well as leukemia and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, in addition to Parkinson's disease.

In the 40s, Pemaco, a chemical plant, ran chemical mixing operations. In December 1993 the facility burned to the ground. Although the fire completely destroyed the warehouse, six 55-gallon drums, several above ground storage tanks, and 31 underground storage tanks remained on the site. In 1999, the EPA placed the site on the Superfund National Priorities List.

The site is contaminated with high levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in the soil beneath the site. The water beneath the site was also contaminated with VOCs, including: dichloroethane (DCA), perchloroethylene (PCE), trichloroethane (TCA), TCE and vinyl chloride (VC). VOCs are known or suspected to cause cancer. Only three blocks from the contaminated site, one of the companies that provides water to Maywood's population operates a water source.

There are three main water companies that supply water to Maywood's population: Maywood Mutual Water Company #1, #2 and #3. Their legal status as non-profit corporations allows them to have great leeway regarding what constitutes "at cost" operation, which allows for the maintenance of privileged executive positions. Moreover, they have access to significant federal and state funds, available at very low or no cost.

At the end of 2010, the Maywood water companies retained GeoTrans Inc., a for-profit corporation, to prepare a report on the quality of water. Under political conditions in Maywood, it is doubtful that the report, even if meaningful, will produce a drive to cleanup health risks.

Asked by *New York Times* reporters about water contamination, Robert Rohlf, Director of Operations at Maywood Mutual Water Company #3, replied: "We follow the letter of the law. If they change it, then that's what we'll do." In other words, health and safety will only be protected if the letter of the law requires it.

To understand the root of the problem, it is therefore necessary to analyze the role of the federal and state government. On one side, the allotment of appropriated funds is grossly insufficient to ensure even the modest tasks set out by current regulations. The state of

California has access to only \$130 million a year.

Moreover, the two main funds, the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) operate like banks. Federal and state contributions are used to capitalize or set up the programs. Low or no-interest loans are granted for up to 20 years.

Political pressure plays a determining role. According to a 2008 Union of Concerned Scientists inquiry, out of nearly 1600 EPA scientists questioned, almost 900 revealed to be victims of political interference—i.e., big business lobbyists.

The EPA has compiled three Contaminant Candidate Lists or CCL. From 1998 to 2009 there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of contaminants found. Moreover, the EPA acknowledges errors and omissions in its database as it pertains to safety violations. Yet, nothing has been done.

On the contrary, policies at federal and state level have consistently cut budgets in crucial areas. The Obama administration's budget cuts this year include \$359 million in EPA funds, from slashing state grants for clean air and water projects to reducing funding for superfund cleanup efforts, as well as another \$105 million from EPA funds aimed at treating wastewater and drinking water.

In California, Governor Jerry Brown has consistently and falsely posed as environment-friendly. Now, his priority is a multi-billion-dollar water delivery project he presented to 900 business leaders, highlighting the class content of his plan.

The Maywood case is not an aberration. It represents a damning indictment of capitalism, a system based on exploitation for profit, not on the satisfaction of human needs, as basic as water. No improvement can be expected under such conditions. Only a systemic change that prioritizes human necessities, i.e., a socialist program, can offer a viable future.



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