

LU-24-027 IN-PERSON TESTIMONY

SUBMITTAL COVER SHEET

Received From: Mark Yeager

Date: 1/27/24

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January 26, 2026

37269 Helm Dr, Corvallis

Commissioners Malone, Shepherd, and Wyse

RE: LU-24-027 Reconsideration Testimony

MEDIA COVERAGE AT REPUBLIC LANDFILLS

Dear Commissioners:

The November 6, 2025, DEQ Pre-enforcement Notice (PEN) should be a wake-up call for Benton County regarding the standard operating procedures of Republic Services at Coffin Butte Landfill. It should also inform the County regarding the reputation and believability of the representations and commitments made by Republic Services in their quest to build a new landfill in Tampico Ridge.

On the other hand, this is business as usual for Republic Services. This story of mismanagement and environmental degradation is apparently being repeated by Republic Services at their landfills all over the United States. They appear to have made a practice of disregarding public complaints, ignoring public health impacts, non-compliance with environmental requirements, and stonewalling environmental regulators.

With this series of testimonies submitted in response to the admission of the November 6, 2025, DEQ Pre-enforcement Notice, I am highlighting the experiences and practices of Republic Services at their landfills to demonstrate the ways in which the proposed expansion of Coffin Butte Landfill will seriously interfere with uses on adjacent properties and the character of the area.

This transmittal highlights eight Republic landfills with specific stories from Middle Point in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Sunshine Canyon in Sylmar CA, and Bridgeton, Missouri.

Likely you will be advised that you cannot use these materials to develop your findings for denial of the proposed new landfill. Nonetheless, while you are deliberating your legacy and the future of Benton County, **your constituents need to know** that you have been made aware of “the Republic way” of conducting landfilling operations here in Benton County, and Republic’s other landfills around the country.

Sincerely,

Mark Yeager

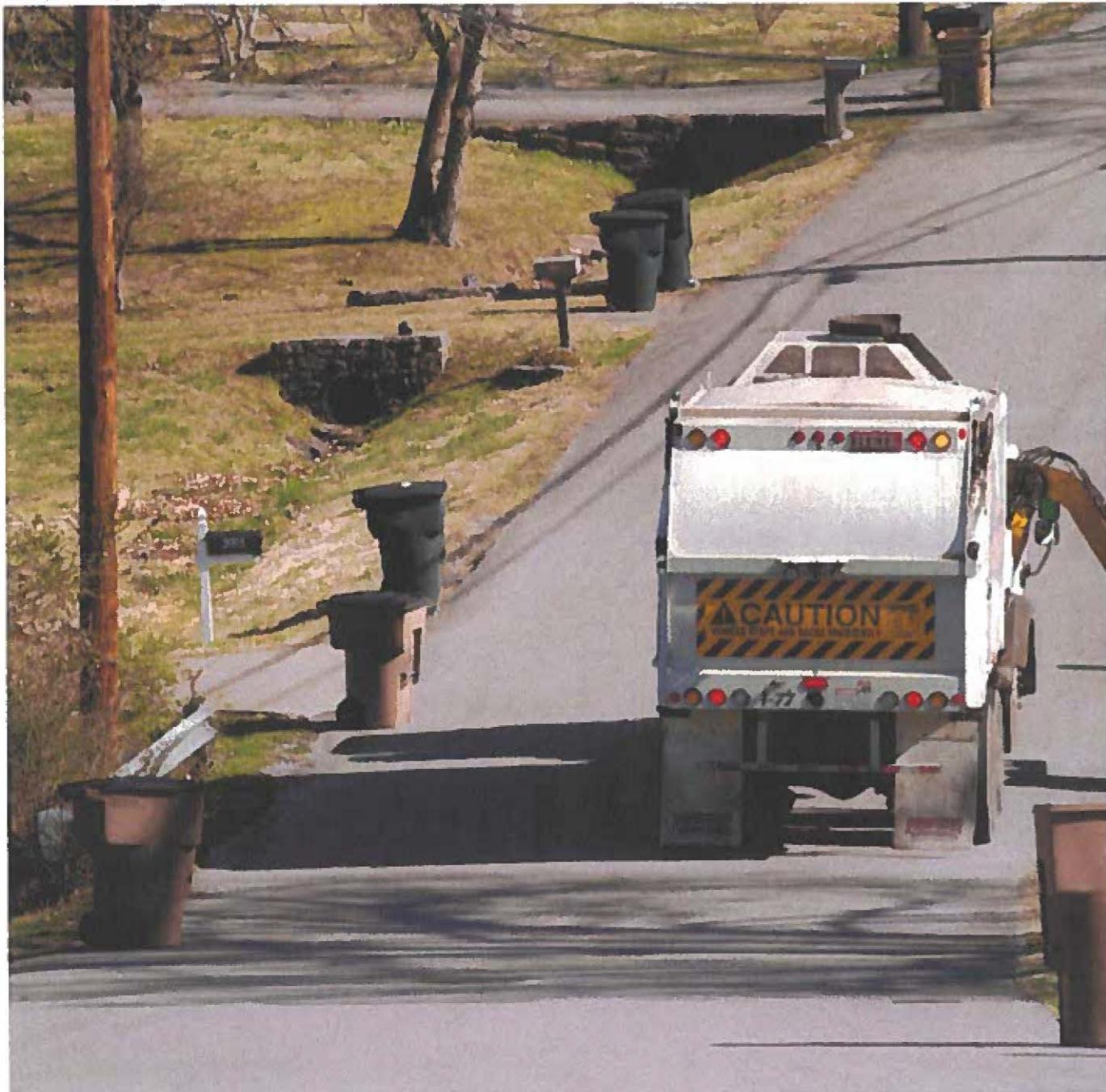
Media Coverage Related to Problems at Republic Landfills

- **Middle Point Landfill in Murfreesboro, Tennessee**
 - Received [7 violations](#) in 2025 from Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, plus additional violations from the city of Murfreesboro for air and water pollution
 - City of Murfreesboro is [suing](#) over expansion plans (BFI is Republic subsidiary)
- **Sunshine Canyon Landfill in Sylmar, California**
 - Nearby residents [report](#) burning throats and eyes
 - In 2024, regulators issued [65 separate notices](#) of violation
- **Modern Landfill in Yorkana, Pennsylvania**
 - Violated the Clean Water Act [419 times](#) between 2019 and 2023
 - Received a [permit](#) in 2017 that would allow dumping up to 500,000 gallons of leachate a year into Kreutz Creek; Republic later admitted that its water treatment system was never designed to treat boron or osmotic pressure – 2 conditions of the permit
 - Recently expanded despite years-long [lawsuit](#) and ongoing [community concerns](#) about water pollution
- **McCarty Road Landfill in Houston, Texas**
 - Nearby communities — which are [more than 90% BIPOC and nearly half low-income](#) — report [respiratory problems and asthma attacks](#)
- **Blue Ridge Landfill near Houston, Texas**
 - From 2015 to 2018, residents filed over [4,500 complaints](#) to TCEQ
 - State regulators [fined](#) the landfill more than \$43K for reported violations of excess methane emissions and misreported data
- **Roxana Landfill in Edwardsville, Illinois**
 - [Sued by the Illinois Attorney General over 11 violations](#)
- **West Lake Landfill in Bridgeton, Missouri** (this is a hazardous waste facility)
 - At least [33 people](#) have been diagnosed with types of cancer linked to radiation, yet Republic claims that the landfill poses "no risk to the community."
- **Wayne Disposal Landfill in Belleville, MI** (hazardous waste facility)
 - Many residents cite [concerns](#) over pollution to the Huron River and Great Lakes
 - Republic [seeking](#) approval to expand by 5 million cubic yards

Tennessee's largest landfill violated air and water rules this year, prompting new tensions

By [Caroline Eggers](#)

November 7, 2025



Stephen Jenkins

Davidson County and more than 30 other counties send trash to Middle Point Landfill in Murfreesboro.

Middle Point Landfill received seven violations from the state this year related to litter and liquid runoff.

In March, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation noted “major violations” in an inspection, due to poor maintenance of a system that handles leachate, the liquid byproduct from [landfills](#) that can be harmful, as well as litter control. The landfill received other [warnings](#) for “minor violations” between June and September this year.

The city that houses the landfill, Murfreesboro, also issued violations in September for air and water pollution. Throughout 2024 and 2025, a consultant group measured high readings of methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

“In many cases, these emissions are corrected during the required time period,” attorneys from Davis, Johnston and Ringger wrote in a [notice](#) on behalf of the city to the landfill. “However, it is indicative of poor operation and maintenance for a landfill to have recurring high levels of surface emissions quarter after quarter.”

The attorneys also noted discharges of [leachate containing PFAS](#), or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, into the East Fork Stones River and its tributaries.



Pierce Gentry WJOT News

A Republic Services trash truck drives over the summit of Middle Point Landfill in Murfreesboro on Friday, Jan. 24, 2025. It is the largest landfill by volume in Tennessee.

Middle Point described the city's efforts to share this information publicly as "grandstanding."

"The seven observations issued by the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation in 2025 at Middle Point Landfill were considered minor and did not include any enforcement action," the company said in a statement.

Middle Point rejected responsibility for PFAS pollution because the landfill is "a passive receiver of material containing PFAS," including from the city's wastewater sludge.

Will Middle Point survive past 2030?

Middle Point Landfill set up shop in Murfreesboro nearly four decades ago. It is Tennessee's largest landfill by volume and has been convenient for a lot of residents — accepting trash from about a third of Tennessee counties.

People living *near* the trash pit, however, have long protested its presence in the community. The city of Murfreesboro has collected at least [4,000 complaints](#) for odor in the past four years.

Middle Point is owned by Republic Services and BFI Waste Systems of Tennessee and has been trying to expand its size since 2021. In 2022, Murfreesboro sued the owners for repeated violations of the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act.

Earlier this year, the company again proposed an expansion, informally, to the Rutherford County Commission. Republic Services general manager Mike Classen proposed cutting off Nashville in an effort to persuade local officials on expansion.

"We cannot be the place where Nashville disposes most of its trash," Classen said in February. He suggested the landfill would accept trash for four more years at its current rate of use.

Unlike Murfreesboro, Nashville and other cities have been fairly quiet in this fight — even though, without expansion, the cities would need to find a new solution for trash pickup soon.

Nashville has not announced a backup plan for how to handle its waste. The city last set up a long-term waste plan in 2019, and its current waste disposal contract expires in 2027.

Next year, the city's waste department will consider alternatives, according to Kendra Abkowitz, director of sustainability for Mayor Freddie O'Connell's office.

"Metro Waste Services will seek a bid to decide what the future of our trash disposal will look like. Because of our proximity to highways and waterways, there are many options," Abkowitz told WPLN in an email.

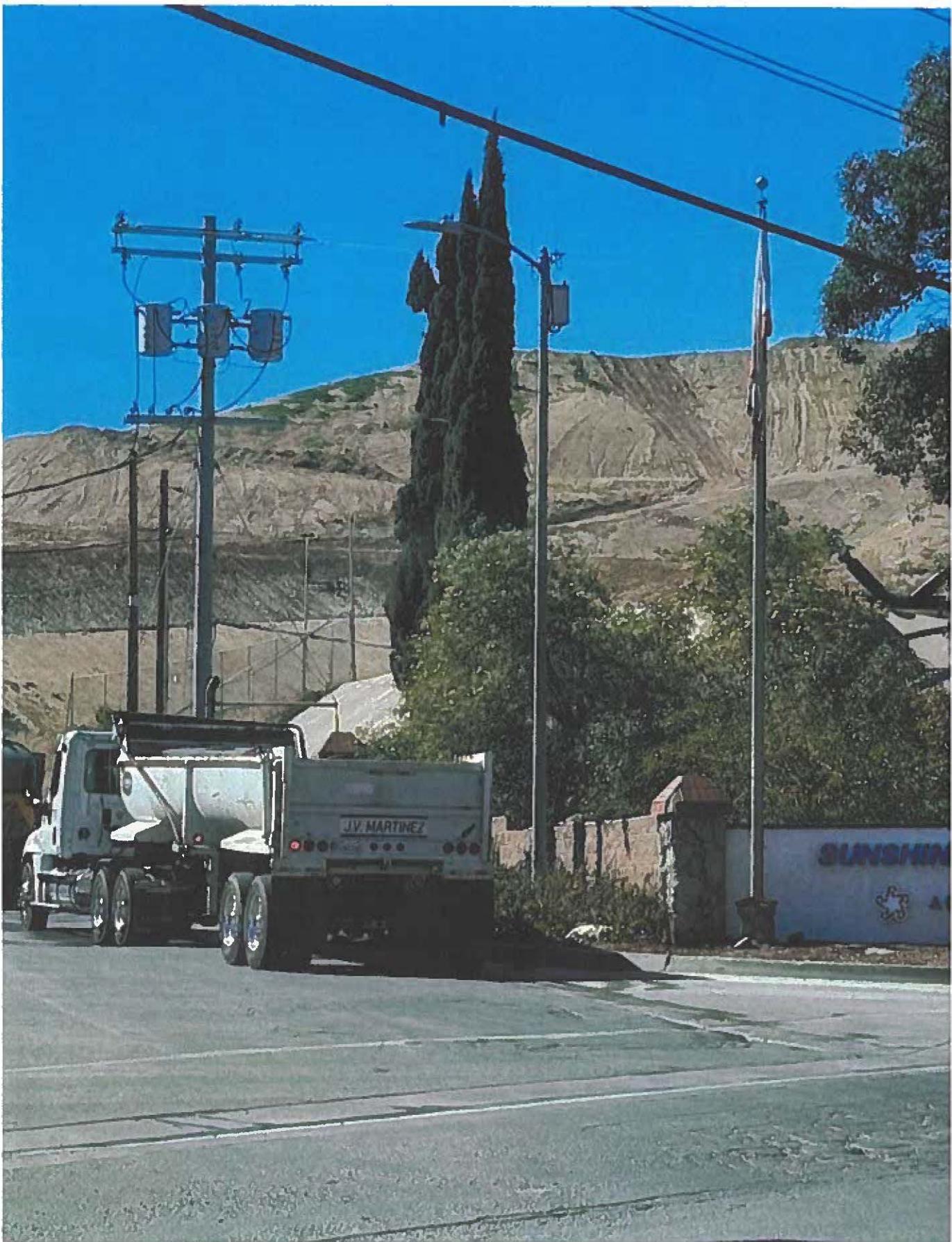
There are solutions beyond primarily relying on Middle Point or other landfills. The city has been experimenting with a [residential composting program](#), which the city recently extended through the end of 2026. State lawmakers Sen. Heidi Campbell and Rep. Bob Freeman, who both represent Nashville, will reintroduce a bill to create new streams of [in-state recycling](#) next year. The Tennessee Environmental Council recently helped create a [seven-minute documentary](#) about the legislation, called the "Tennessee Waste to Jobs Act."

At the same time, there are efforts by companies to create new landfills in Tennessee. State lawmakers may consider weakening the power of local governments to block new landfill projects through the "Jackson Law" during the next legislation session. One such fight is now playing out in [Scott County](#).

A stinky landfill torments its neighbors in the northern Valley

Residents say the smell can sometimes be unbearable, and irritates throats, noses, and eyes.
by **Ashley Orona** and **Dan Ross** (03/11/2025 11:28 am)

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Last year, 2,187 complaints — a 20-year record — translated into 65 notices of violation at Sunshine Canyon Landfill. Credit: Ashley Orona / LA Public Press

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In Granada Hills, at the northern tip of the San Fernando Valley, residents are surrounded by mountains, walking trails, and parks. But they can't seem to enjoy all the natural beauty because the neighborhood's other major defining feature is a giant, stinky landfill.

"It's just rotten trash. It's really distinctive. You can't miss it," said Jacqui Cunz, who for nine years, has lived about a mile from Sunshine Canyon Landfill in Sylmar.

Some days the smell is simply an annoyance. Other days it is strong enough to burn people's nostrils and make their eyes water and throats itch. When that happens, Cunz prefers to stay inside. But even when she seals all of her doors and windows shut, she said the smell can still creep in.

In the summer, residents said the smell worsens. And on windy days, plastic bags and paper trash blow onto their manicured lawns. Others said they have to clean up layers of dirt in their yards from the landfill operator constantly importing soil, and using it to cover the trash.

"It's a bummer because everybody loves living here, everybody loves the area," said Cunz. "Not when you wake up to smells almost everyday."

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The strong odors inundate the neighborhood as frequently as a few times a week. Meg Volk, who has lived in the area for 33 years, said in the past month she has made 11 calls to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, or AQMD, the region's air regulatory agency, to report strong odors from the landfill.

There's been a few times where Volk has taken a chance and slept with the window open in her bedroom but was awoken by putrid smells early in the morning. Even if it's 2 a.m., she said she gets up to call AQMD because she's "so pissed."

In January, AQMD received 118 complaints from locals about odor and issued three notices of violation. Jan. 6 looked like a particularly smelly morning, with 27 complaints just minutes apart, with many coming from addresses nearby Van Gogh Charter School.

The community's frustrations aren't new — the landfill has been a nuisance neighbor for decades, and not just for Granada Hills, but other nearby neighborhoods. But the problems appear to have accelerated over the past couple of years. The landfill is also slated to take in fire ash and debris from January's devastating Palisades and Eaton fires — putting a renewed focus on decades of complaints from local residents.

Last year, regulators issued 65 separate notices of violation for a record annual number of public odor complaints for the facility. According to publicly available data, this number is significantly higher than for the other three solid waste landfills in LA and Simi Valley taking in ash and debris from January's fires in Altadena and Pacific Palisades. AQMD has filed a petition for an abatement order against the landfill operator, Phoenix-based Republic Services, to try to force it to comply with state and local rules on nuisance odors. A hearing for the order is scheduled for later this month.

In response to questions about Sunshine Canyon's compliance history and the complaints by local residents, a Republic Services media representative wrote that the company has "comprehensive safety and environmental programs in place," including a "state-of-the-art liner system," and "robust gas collection system to help ensure material is managed safely and responsibly."

Jane Williams, executive director of California Communities Against Toxics, an environmental advocacy organization, said she doesn't believe the operators are doing nearly enough to protect the community. "Everyone knows that this landfill is completely out of control," she said.

"It never should have been put there in the first place"

The Sunshine Canyon Landfill started life back in the 1950s as an illegal dump. People would pull up to the edge of the canyon and tip into it all sorts of garbage and waste.

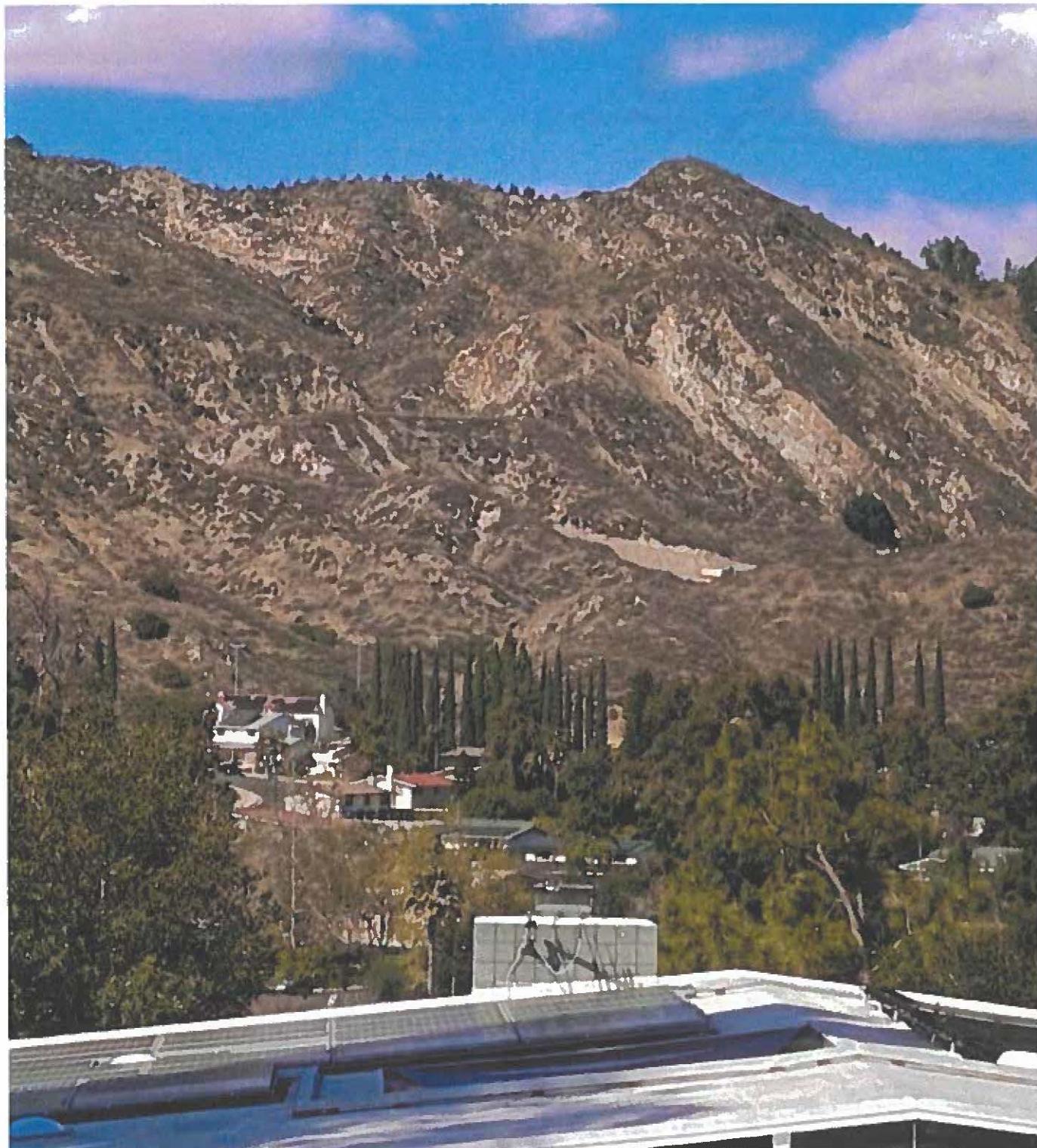
In 1958, the city of Los Angeles issued to Republic Services a permit for a 40-acre landfill. Since then, it has grown into the largest dump site in the county, said Wayde Hunter, president of the North Valley Coalition of Concerned Citizens, a nonprofit that has historically opposed any expansion to the landfill and has advocated for action by local authorities on years of odor complaints by community members. And he's not happy about it.

"It never should have been put there in the first place," said Hunter, who explained that the canyon is in the notoriously windy Newhall Pass. "What happens in the landfill happens in our houses. And we're stuck with this stinking landfill until 2037," he added, highlighting its planned closure date, when it's expected to reach capacity.

Compared to other states, California's solid waste landfills are among the most strictly regulated, said Craig Benson, a member of the National Academy of Engineering with decades of experience on the topic. "They're really very careful and very thoughtful about the way they regulate landfills," he said.

But that doesn't mean landfills are necessarily safe or pleasant to live near, said Nick Lapis, director of advocacy with Californians Against Waste, a nonprofit pushing for better waste management practices and an overall reduction in waste-streams. He pointed to LA County's Chiquita Canyon Landfill, which recently closed due to a hard-to-quench chemical reaction within the body of the trash causing it to heat up, at the same time exacerbating air emissions and odors stemming from the facility.

"The El Sobrante Landfill [in Riverside County] is also having a subsurface fire, which I didn't even know about until this morning," said Lapis, recently. "It's pretty clear that our requirements aren't especially protective, even if they're stricter than the federal rules. It's a pretty low bar."



Sunshine Canyon Landfill is tucked into the hills. Credit: Ashley Orona / LA Public Press

2,187 complaints in one year

The AQMD issues notices of violations to landfills in its region when inspectors can confirm that public nuisance complaints are directly attributed to the facility — typically from at least six separate households, or from a school when children are present.

After Sunshine Canyon took additional steps around 2014 to better manage odors and air emissions, public complaints dropped off precipitously. But they've spiked again over the past two years. In 2023, 1,721 odor complaints resulted in 61 notices of violation. Last year, 2,187 complaints — a 20-year record — translated into 65 notices of violation.

Though notices of violation can come with a fine, no financial penalties have been issued to Sunshine Canyon since the start of 2023. An AQMD spokesperson explained that the agency is still in the process of negotiating potential penalties, with delays due in part to disruptions from the January fires.

The facility also faces regulatory actions for the way it has managed rainwater runoff over the past two years, exacerbated by two unusually wet winters.

In May 2023, the Regional Water Quality Control Board issued Sunshine Canyon a notice of violation for 11 separate water discharge and stormwater violations requiring corrective actions, like allowing waste to wash into water drainage facilities or watercourses.

The growing criticism against operations at Sunshine Canyon in recent years provides a backdrop to the more recent public outcry over plans to deliver fire ash debris to the facility, with serious questions over exactly what's in the ash.

During a recent virtual townhall, Dr. Muntu Davis, the county health officer at the LA County Department of Public Health, said the ash “can be toxic and dangerous, depending on what burned.” Officials in Hawaii tested the wildfire ash left after the 2023 fires and found elevated levels of potentially toxic lead, arsenic, cobalt, and copper.

Sanjay Mohanty, an associate professor at UCLA’s Samueli School of Engineering, said he’s not unduly concerned about the ash going to the landfill provided extra monitoring is performed as a precaution, and the findings are made accessible to the public to assuage concerns.

“There should be a high frequency of monitoring, and monitoring at more locations around the community,” said Mohanty. “I think transparency is key here.”

Will this be done at Sunshine Canyon? Not exactly. There will be no additional air monitors positioned at and around Sunshine Canyon, according to AQMD spokesperson Rainbow Yeung.

The agency, however, has begun conducting “field activities” at landfills set to receive the fire ash, Yeung added, including unannounced on-site inspections and community surveillance. It also plans to respond “to public complaints submitted by local residents, emphasizing schools and other locations that may have vulnerable populations.”

But critics say that’s not enough.

“Those are not just odors the nearby residents are smelling,” said Williams, the anti-pollution advocate with California Communities Against Toxics, referencing federal air emissions data from 2020. These “dangerous air pollutants,” she said, include almost 45 tons of sulphur dioxide (which is responsible for the odor complaints), 16 tons

of particulate pollution, 33 tons of nitrogen oxide, and almost six tons of volatile organic compounds.

Sunshine Canyon has also long been a massive emitter of methane — more than 17 thousand tons of it in 2020 alone, according to federal data. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas and primary contributor to the formation of ground-level ozone, a dangerous air pollutant. Landfills in general are one of the biggest emitters of methane in California. Typically, methane is extracted through a series of wells and pipes before being flared off or recycled as a fuel. The state, however, could be doing a much better job at making landfill operators plug the problem, said Lapis with Californians Against Waste.

The California Air Resources Board is considering an update to its 2010 “Landfill Methane Regulation,” in part because the current approach to methane monitoring is ineffective and inefficient, experts say. The updates come as new research shows emissions are significantly higher than previously estimated, according to the board.

Methane isn’t the only problem chemical at Sunshine Canyon. In 2019, leachate (the liquid that seeps through landfills) and non-drinking water groundwater testing at the facility found per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, a vast class of chemicals found in everyday products, from non-stick cookware to clothes to carpets. Some of the most ubiquitous PFAS are known to be toxic to humans.

A subsequent report found that the PFAS concentrations in the leachate at Sunshine Canyon was within the expected range, and no further sampling was recommended. But as our understanding of PFAS grows, so does the problem. A recent study found that PFAS are potentially leaving landfills at a greater rate through the air than through water. Limited testing means it’s wholly unclear the extent of PFAS pollution leaving Sunshine Canyon, and how.

Veronica Herrera, a UCLA associate professor of urban planning and political science, said that while safe disposal technologies exist, landfills typically have “just so many associated problems.”

Herrera was part of a team that last year found residents living around landfills — often in low-income, vulnerable communities — are overburdened by the risks from plastic pollution, like inhaling and ingesting microplastics.

“It’s important to think about who can distance themselves from waste, and who can’t,” she said

To address changing weather patterns, Republic Services has regraded certain areas of the landfill to prevent ponding, modified berms to prevent erosion and better manage more rainfall alongside other erosion controls, and improved the permanent drainage structures, according to the company’s spokesperson. It has also installed 100 vertical gas extraction wells within the last year to better manage odors, with 100 more scheduled for installation this year.

“We’ve also installed more than 10,000 linear feet of horizontal or slope collectors to help enhance gas collection. We have deployed new vapor and misting systems throughout the landfill, and a dedicated Odor Patrol Team patrols the site and nearby neighborhoods every day,” the spokesperson said in an email.

These steps have not appeased the residents living in the landfill’s shadow.

A showdown is coming

Meg Volk’s backyard in Granada Hills with a grassy lawn, pool, and spa looks like the kind pictured in home improvement magazines. She

used to enjoy hosting friends and barbecues. But she has stopped inviting guests over to visit.

"It's just so annoying that you just cannot enjoy your own personal property," said Volk.

Jacqui Cunz can see the landfill from her backyard. That wasn't always the case — but the landfill has grown and become more visible over the nearly 20 years she's lived there. When the mountain vegetation is dry and brown, the landfill blends in with the mountain ranges. When the mountains are green, Cunz said, the dump looks like a "scar" along the hillside.

Granada Hills resident Tiffany Sayaphupha does not consider Republic Services to be "good stewards" of the neighborhood. She said the company is not doing enough to contain and handle the smells from the regular household trash it handles. And she's not confident the operator will do its due diligence in handing the additional fire debris going to the landfill.

"We're at their mercy," said Sayaphupha.

Sayaphupha has children who attend Van Gogh Charter School, located about two miles away from the landfill. She and other parents are especially concerned about the possible long-term health consequences of odors and incoming fire debris on their children.

At the school's dismissal time last Tuesday, it was warm enough to not wear a jacket. But there was a breeze, especially in the shade. Neighbors walked their dogs at Bee Canyon Park, and a few teenage boys were skateboarding nearby in a dried up reservoir.

Asked about the landfill, some parents said they'd been notified about smells in the past, others said no.

A spokesperson for the Los Angeles Unified School District said in an email that if odors are present at levels that are determined to be "strong" or "disruptive" during school hours, the Van Gogh principal is expected to implement an "indoor activity" schedule until odors disappear. The Van Gogh administration should also submit a complaint to AQMD and the district's Office of Environmental Health and Safety.

Eric Fefferman, a former Van Gogh parent and Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council member, said at a meeting last month that he recently pulled his son from the school because the odor was "so strong."

On a recent morning, Leonardo Muñoz, another Van Gogh parent, said a putrid trash smell was coming from the landfill as he dropped off his child at school, which is not uncommon.

He immediately called AQMD to report it.

"I think it does affect our health at least to some degree, whether you have kids or not," said Muñoz.

The community's growing chorus of criticism will come to a head at the AQMD's offices in Diamond Bar on March 19, when the hearing on the petitioned abatement order is scheduled to go ahead. Disillusioned community members aren't holding their breath the hearing will result in action. "Don't expect miracles but these are the only people who can make them do anything like reduce tonnage or reduce hours if only temporarily until the odors are abated," wrote Wayde Hunter, in an email to the community last week.

"[Residents] don't want to take it anymore," said Cunz. "It's like nobody is doing anything in the political realm to listen to our problems or help us."

BRIDGETON, Missouri

The 43,000 tons of radioactive waste and soil came from a top-secret initiative: The Manhattan Project, which built the atomic bombs America dropped on Japan in 1945.

In 1973, that waste ended up in an unlined landfill in Bridgeton, Missouri, a St. Louis suburb. Workers spread it to cover trash and construction debris. In 1990, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared the West Lake Landfill one of the nation's most contaminated sites requiring cleanup. Still, many who lived near the dump didn't know about West Lake's toxic history.

It wasn't until 2012, when garbage was burning underground, that the landfill burst fully into public view. The stench smothered nearby neighborhoods. Parents shut their kids inside. Emergency responders drew up evacuation plans, worried the smoldering waste would cause a nuclear catastrophe. Residents mobilized, spotlighting stories of children dying from cancer. And they pressed waste-management giant Republic Services, the dump's owner, to remove the radioactive waste. In 2017, HBO aired a documentary about their cause.

Testing for radioactive material

The EPA has taken more than 1,000 soil samples from the West Lake Landfill and the surrounding area and found some radioactive material outside the site. The agency continues to investigate and says it will use the findings in deciding on a cleanup plan.

Sources: EPA, Google Earth

For all the radioactive publicity, though, Republic beat back neighbors' claims. The nuclear waste is still there, and the government hasn't said when a cleanup will begin.

In refuting neighbors' complaints, Republic tapped an unlikely ally that U.S. corporations have leaned on for decades: a federal health agency set up to protect people from environmental hazards just like the West Lake dump.

A 2015 [report](#) by that small bureaucracy, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), did not identify any radioactive material outside the landfill. It declared that the landfill posed no health risk to the community and that radioactive gas would not leave the site. Its assessment contradicted findings from two sets of scientists: some hired by Missouri's Attorney General and others from an environmental consulting firm working with residents. Republic still uses the ATSDR report to argue for a less expensive cleanup of the contamination, despite mounting evidence that the agency's assessment was wrong.

Some residents told Reuters they resent the agency's part in the drawn-out saga. Deborah Mitchell grew up in Spanish Village, less than a mile from the dump. She lost both parents to cancer and battled the disease herself. Dozens of neighbors have similar stories. Three cancer researchers told Reuters the number of cases in the neighborhood is worrisome and requires comprehensive study. That's never been done.

"You just feel like you're being gaslighted by your own government," Mitchell said of the ATSDR's role.

Republic Services, in an emailed response to Reuters questions, said it agrees with the ATSDR's finding that the landfill poses no risk to the community. Its own experts reached a similar conclusion in 2015, it said.

The company has "always advocated for the responsible remediation of West Lake," says the statement from Republic subsidiary Bridgeton Landfill LLC. The company has spent "tens of millions of dollars" studying the landfill and has "fully complied with every EPA directive."

Also responsible for the site are mining firm Cotter Corp and the U.S. Department of Energy, manager of the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal. The DOE declined to comment, and Cotter did not respond to questions about the cleanup plans.

Republic's use of the ATSDR to argue for a less extensive cleanup of the West Lake Landfill is a strategy some companies wield at toxic sites across the U.S.

The ATSDR, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a public health agency that advises the EPA. It was created in 1980 by a landmark federal law that required polluters to clean up their toxic messes. The agency was meant to safeguard the public by identifying risks from those sites. Instead, it regularly downplays and disregards neighbors' health concerns, a Reuters investigation found. Companies and other polluters wield the agency's work against the people it is meant to protect.

The agency issued 428 reports containing 1,582 health-related findings from 2012 to 2023. In 68% of its findings, it declared communities safe from hazards or did not make any determination at all, a Reuters review found.

ATSDR's record of finding little harm at the nation's most contaminated waste sites strains credulity, said Judith Enck, a former regional administrator for the EPA. She is now president and founder of Beyond Plastics, a nonprofit that seeks to end plastics pollution.

"This is not at all surprising and why I advise community groups not to request ATSDR involvement," she said. "ATSDR has a long history of minimizing environmental health problems, and that needs an independent investigation by Congress."



SEEKING ANSWERS: Tonya Mason asks a question during a May, 9, 2023, Environmental Protection Agency meeting in Bridgeton, Missouri. The meeting was about cleanup plans for a landfill holding radioactive waste. Mason fears her health problems are tied to the landfill. REUTERS/Alyssa Pointer

The agency's frequent declarations of no harm often are rooted in faulty research, Reuters found. At least 38% of the time, agency reports show, its researchers relied on old or flawed data.

Reuters consulted with 15 sources with experience in environmental and public health for its analysis.

ATSDR officials did not respond to questions about its overall performance, errors in its work, or how polluters use its reports. In an emailed statement to Reuters, it noted that its report on the West Lake Landfill did identify one potential harm: that radioactive dust particles could be released if the surface of the landfill were disturbed. Those particles could be inhaled by workers and harm their health, the statement said.

"At the West Lake Landfill Site, ATSDR did not have evidence that residents were drinking landfill contaminated groundwater, eating or incidentally ingesting landfill contaminated

soils, breathing landfill-related radon, or absorbing radiation emitted by landfill contaminants,” the statement said.

It is impossible to know how often the agency has been correct in declaring communities safe, because the search for harm often ends once the ATSDR reports its findings. Still, Reuters found at least 20 instances from 1996 to 2017 where the agency declared that a potential hazard posed no health risk – only to be refuted later by other government agencies or the ATSDR itself. Those reports relied on outdated or limited data, contained math errors or provided overly optimistic conclusions.

Patrick Breysse, who led the agency from 2014 until 2022, said that out of the hundreds of reports the ATSDR has published, 20 is a small number. And he noted that not all polluted sites are dangerous.

But he acknowledged that the agency often bases decisions on whatever information happens to be at hand rather than its own well-constructed studies.