



For Immediate Release
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U.S. Lead Battery Exports Cause Soil Lead Contamination in Mexico

New study shows extensive soil contamination around lead battery recycling plants

San Francisco and Guadalajara – Used lead batteries exported from the U.S. to Mexico are causing extensive contamination around battery recycling plants. Lead concentrations in soil are six times higher than the Mexican standard according to a new report. Mexico is the largest importer of used lead batteries in the world and the U.S. the largest exporter of this hazardous waste.

A single company, Clarios (formerly Johnson Controls), was responsible for 68% of all used lead battery exports sent from the U.S. to Mexico in 2021. The average soil lead level around the Clarios Garcia plant, that imported almost half of all the used batteries going to Mexico, was 8,502 ppm or more than ten times the limit. In 2021 the Company closed its only U.S. recycling plant impacting 350 workers in South Carolina and instead shipped used batteries to their more polluting facilities in Mexico.

The study “Hazardous Exports Contribute to Soil Contamination at Lead Battery Recycling Plants in Mexico” found that 57% of soil samples collected exceeded the limit for industrial areas with an average lead concentration of 4,897 ppm or more than six times the Mexican Standard of 800 parts per million (ppm). Soil contamination around lead battery recycling plants comes both from stack emissions and from fugitive dust transported offsite.

The report, released jointly by Casa Cem and Occupational Knowledge International, includes data obtained from the U.S. EPA under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) that documents exports of used lead batteries from the U.S. to Mexico increased by 18% from 2011 to 2021. The report also notes that Mexican regulations currently allow for three times greater airborne lead levels around these industrial facilities than is permitted in the U.S. Environmental and occupational health enforcement capacity is also lacking in Mexico.

Sofia Chavez, Executive Director of the Mexican nonprofit Casa Cem and co-author of the study, said “Mexico must update its environmental and occupational exposure limits and enforcement capacity to be on par with the U.S. She added that “These plants are poisoning workers and neighboring communities”.

As far back as 2011 Johnson Controls (the former owner) announced that they would invest \$70 million dollars to upgrade furnaces and install “state-of-the-art” environmental control technologies at its recycling facility in Cienega de Flores. However, there is no evidence that these improvements were ever completed. The

company which was purchased by a Canadian private equity firm in 2019 has announced plans for an Initial Public Offering (IPO) this year.

Since 2020, Clarios has donated more than \$30 million to UNICEF and the U.S.-based nonprofit Pure Earth in an attempt to improve their image. These organizations have released reports placing blame on “informal” lead battery recycling while not calling for more restrictive regulations on licensed recyclers that operate large polluting smelters.

Perry Gottesfeld, Executive Director of Occupational Knowledge International and co-author of the study said that “The Biden Administration cannot claim to prioritize environmental justice at home while allowing the export of hazardous waste to processing facilities that are polluting vulnerable communities in low and middle-income countries.” He added that “The U.S. should take the initiative to support Mexican efforts to implement and enforce regulations to reduce exposures from this extremely hazardous industry.”

Lead exposures are associated with a range of health effects including high blood pressure, heart disease, reduced kidney function and neurological damage impacting both children and adults. Lead exposures are responsible for almost one million deaths per year according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

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About Occupation Knowledge International (OK International)

OK International is a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco that works to build capacity in developing countries to identify, monitor, and mitigate environmental and occupational exposures to hazardous materials in order to protect public health and the environment. The organization seeks to address inequities in environmental standards between developed and developing countries by working in partnership with industry, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For more information, visit www.okinternational.org.

About Casa Cem

Casa Cem is a not-for-profit organization based in Guadalajara that works to improve the environmental health conditions in Mexico through training, awareness, advocacy, education, research and cultural projects related to the lifecycle of natural resources, harmful chemicals and their interaction with human health. For more information, visit <https://casacem.com>