

State to probe birth defects spike in Calif. town

January 30 2010, By TRACIE CONE , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has ordered two state agencies to investigate a rash of birth defects that have confounded impoverished Kettleman City for more than a year.

Schwarzenegger's intervention into a bitter environmental battle came as a surprise and relief to both residents and the activists who have been demanding answers.

"This is a tremendous victory for the people of Kettleman City, whose pleas for help have fallen on deaf ears, including the state's for the past 15 months, said Bradley Angel, executive director of the environmental justice group Greenaction. "We just wish he would have done this a year ago."

The [birth defects](#) became a rallying point last year for residents trying to stop the expansion plans of the West's largest hazardous waste facility by Chemical Waste Management Inc. Their stories of miscarriages and the photographs they carried of children with facial defects failed to convince the Kings County Board of Supervisors that the company's expansion plans should not go forward.

"It seems like we're finally getting justice," said resident Maricela Mares-Alatorre, whose family first butted heads with Waste Management 20 years ago over plans to build an incinerator. "It has been a long time coming."

Mares-Alatorre and Angel said they hope the governor will stop the permit process.

"We want what everyone in every town wants: health and safety," Mares-Alatorre said. "To get to see now what is causing the problems here is a big victory for us."

Officials of Waste Management said they welcome the investigation and are confident it will show their operation is not to blame for the facial defects in five of 20 children born there between September 2007 and November 2008.

"We are very confident that our facility is protective of human health and the environment, but it is critical that the families in Kettleman City get answers," said spokeswoman Kit Cole.

The town sits near Interstate 5, a the main trucking corridor in California. Some say diesel emissions and pesticides on nearby farm fields could be contributing to the health problems.

Schwarzenegger's order comes two days after a protest in San Francisco outside of the U.S. EPA headquarters, where residents of the town of 1,500 residents midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco sought to draw attention to the issues.

Also this week Jared Blumenfeld, administrator for the EPA's Pacific Southwest region, promised to visit Kettleman City and to probe his own department and make sure "every enforcement, regulatory and permitting action that should've been taken has been taken."

The governor said both the California Department of Public Health and the state EPA will conduct the investigation and present initial findings at a meeting Feb. 9. The investigation will include interviews with

residents, and reviews of soil samples and medical records.

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