

ENVIRONMENT

Antelope Valley residents are engaged in legal battle against massive illegal dumping

An environmental attorney says huge debris piles present 'increased risk of fire, airborne toxins and groundwater contamination'

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On a blustery blue morning in early June, Beth Worrell scampered up a 10-foot-tall, woodchip-covered berm that juts for more than a quarter-mile from the dusty Mojave Desert floor just inside the Kern County line near unincorporated Neenach.

Worrell paused briefly at the top of the giant mound and then disappeared down the other side. A few minutes later, she reemerged, clutching a handful of unlikely treasures.

"I'm making a collage for Kristina," Worrell said wryly as she placed a plastic baby bottle, a metal rod, a rusty pair of pliers, and a used syringe in the dirt with her bare hands.

Worrell's friends, Kristina Brown of Fairmont and Ashley Mroz of Neenach, are engaged in a David vs. Goliath legal battle against some titans of Southern California's waste management industry over the Kern dump site and more than 100 others like it scattered throughout the Antelope Valley.

A federal lawsuit filed by the pair in April aims to rid the desert of thousands of tons of household construction, demolition and solid waste disguised as mulch that has been illegally dumped for decades in the far reaches of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Kern counties. Brown and Mroz allege Arakelian Enterprises Inc., doing business as Athens Services; Universal Waste Systems Inc.; California Waste Services, LLC; Organic Energy Solutions, LLC; and America's Recycling Co. Inc. are violating federal environmental laws by collecting trash from contracted Los Angeles-area cities and then discarding it in the Antelope Valley to skirt expensive landfill fees.

"These sites have been used to bury large amounts of solid waste without the oversight or safeguards required by law," said Washington, D.C., environmental attorney

of Ventura, who owns Cal-Spreading LLC. Irwin, who is also a defendant in the suit and did not respond to requests for comment, is accused of partnering with several companies to illegally dispose of waste.

SAFETY CONCERN

A Southern California News Group review of hundreds of pages of environmental reports and emails, along with numerous photographs and videos, reveals the immense toll of unregulated dumping in the Antelope Valley.

Aside from the obvious eyesore of piles of smelly waste towering more than 30 feet high in some spots, serious health and environmental threats lurk in the air and the soil.

"When the trucks were coming in and dumping, you could see the plumes of dirt in the air," said Mroz, who lives about 1 1/2 miles from the Three Points dumpsite. "Who knows what we were breathing in?"

The Three Points site is a mere 528 feet from a main water well that serves Neenach's 798 residents. None of the illegal dumps are equipped with protective liners to prevent groundwater contamination, Kelsay said.

From 2020 to 2024, self-combustible wood chips and organic materials used to camouflage garbage as mulch have sparked 42 fires, costing taxpayers more than \$1.6 million to extinguish and exposing downwind Antelope Valley residents to toxic smoke, contaminated dust and airborne particulates, according to the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

The Bravo fire on April 29, 2024, at the 80-acre Hallgren dump site on 280th Street West near Neenach, cost the Fire Department more than \$288,000, took four days to extinguish, and wafted toxic smoke over residences, the department said in a report last year.

Following the Bravo fire, Mroz said, her 5-year-old daughter had nosebleeds and a dry cough for more than seven months and now suffers from asthma, likely due to



Beth Worrell displays items from a massive Neenach mulch berm in June 2025. SCOTT SCHWEBKE — STAFF



Area residents Ashley Mroz, left, and Beth Worrell examine



pose a serious threat to public health and safety, including increased risk of fire, airborne toxins and groundwater contamination. Our goal is to ensure these sites are remediated so they no longer endanger the surrounding neighborhoods or environment."

Athens, which has a 15-year, \$687 million contract with Los Angeles to process residential organic waste, denies any wrongdoing.

"Athens does not engage in illegal dumping as alleged. Athens' organic material goes through a comprehensive process at our advanced compost facilities," the company said in an email. "The material is routinely tested for compliance with CalRecycle's standards, and our processing facilities are regularly inspected for adherence with state regulations."

Diversion records for the city of Los Angeles show that from 2021 to 2024, Crown Recycling Services in Sun Valley, which is owned by Athens, shipped thousands of tons of waste to Cal-Spreading for the Three Points dump site near Neenach, which is on the L.A. County side of the border with Kern.

Additionally, in May 2024, San Bernardino County issued a notice of violation to Athens-owned American Organics for illegal dumping at a vacant parcel in El Mirage.

Bill Love, chief of BioStar Renewables, which is the parent company of Organic Energy Solutions, also denied the lawsuit's allegations.

"Material leaving our facility is regularly tested by an independent laboratory and subjected to regular government inspection," Love said. "Test results consistently show that material leaving our facility tests below legal limits for metals and other contaminants. While others may be engaged in improper activities, BioStar is committed to clean, renewable energy and is confident that the truth will demonstrate that BioStar's conduct has been safe and ethical."

California Waste Services President Eric Casper said his company has never dumped construction, demolition or household waste in the Antelope Valley or anywhere else.

The remaining companies named as defendants did not respond to requests for comment.

Although the suit targets six major dumpsites, more than 100 others of various sizes have been identified in the Antelope Valley, Kelsay said.

One prolific dump totaling 160 acres in the community of Fairmont previously belonged to Sean Irwin

hair, clothes and our dog's hair," Mroz said, adding that she and her husband also have a 2-year-old son. "People couldn't even drive near the area without getting a headache or even a bloody nose. It completely robbed me and my kids of the sanctuary of our home. We moved here for the beautiful open land, sunrises and sunsets, not to be a dumping ground."

DECADES OF DUMPING

Illegal dumping — especially of contaminated mulch and construction debris — has long plagued the Antelope Valley. But it has been exacerbated within the past five years by stricter state organic waste diversion mandates and limited disposal infrastructure, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chair Kathryn Barger said.

In October 2024, the supervisors unanimously approved proposals from Barger for stronger illegal dumping policies, including new ordinances regulating mulch application, contamination thresholds and fire prevention standards.

Plans to use mobile cameras, license plate readers and drones to monitor hotspots and catch offenders have been adopted.

"Rural communities are suffering from illegal mulch dumping that is extreme and uncontrolled," Barger said. "Our county needs to step up its work to cite and enforce every applicable regulation to put a stop to this illegal dumping, now."

Economics is driving the problem, with haulers opting to pay as little as \$4 a ton to dump at an illegal site instead of \$60 to \$120 a ton at a licensed facility.

Some haulers contract with landowners, while others put trash on private property when residents are not present, leaving them with the responsibility of cleaning it up.

The dumping problem has also been exacerbated by loopholes in state law that initially limited enforcement to landowners instead of haulers and waste generators.

Additionally, there has been an oversupply of green waste tied to state mandates without sufficient end-use markets, Barger said.

MIXED OUTCOMES

Los Angeles County's crackdown on illicit dumping has yielded mixed results.

Dumping cases decreased from 21,959 in 2020 to 8,216 in 2023. More than 16,000 tons of illegal waste were dumped in the county in 2020, 11,500 tons in 2022 and 16,700 tons in 2023.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health reported

that expenditures to mitigate illegal dumping increased from \$1.3 million in the 2017-18 fiscal year to \$4.4 million in fiscal 2022-23.

Additionally, the number of cases filed by the Los Angeles County district attorney's Environmental Crimes Division decreased from 15 in 2019 to just two in 2023. No cases were filed in 2024 or so far this year.

Illegal dumping on public and private property is punishable by a fine of up to \$10,000 and six months in jail.

Satellite images indicate materials deposited on Irwin's property rapidly increased in size from January to February 2024.

Eventually, the waste piles — containing plastic buckets, tiles, particle boards, concrete, foam, tires, linoleum, drywall and plastic ground with woodchips — grew more than 15 feet high and stretched for a half-mile. Irwin has since flattened the material with heavy equipment.

"It looked like a Twinkie stuffed with construction debris," Brown said.

Brown vented on Neenach's community Facebook page that the waste was perilously close to her property and threatened two state parks, the Portal Ridge Wildlife Preserve, the Angeles National Forest and an aqueduct.

"The trucks keep coming, and the piles of contaminated mulch, boiler fuel and trash have been getting closer to my home daily, and last week the piles were dropped on our common property line — so it's all we see and smell," Brown wrote to the group's 820 members. "All this waste will never degrade. It smells terribly. It's an insane fire hazard."

Irwin, who is suing Brown for defamation in Los Angeles Superior Court, claimed to the county that he intended to plant alfalfa and barley on the property for animal feed. However, Brown noted on Facebook that water, irrigation wells, silos, drying structures, and farming equipment were conspicuously absent from the parcel.

ing field that belonged to Irwin, the Cal-Spreading LLC owner.

For several weeks, Brown and her ex-husband, Colin Roddick, watched in disbelief as more than 30 to 50 trucks a day arrived at the property before 6 a.m. to well after dark and unloaded massive quantities of a mysterious gray-colored material that seemed to have no agricultural purpose.

"We are not farmers, but it didn't look right," Brown said.

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Despite issuing a notice of violation and a corrective action order, Los Angeles County abruptly reversed its position, effectively authorizing Irwin to continue dumping, the attorneys said.

Information was not immediately available from Los Angeles County regarding whether Irwin was fined. He sold his property for \$290,000 in June to a renewable energy company.

Although dumping has stopped on the property, Mroz said that having to continuously badger the county to take meaningful enforcement action against waste companies has left her exhausted and jaded.

"My perspective has changed to the point where I don't trust the county or the government," she said. "They're supposed to be working for us."