

Community Concerns and Government Response to Hazardous Waste Processing at Will Rogers State Beach

Attendees:

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Overview of Operations at Will Rogers

The discussion focused on the ongoing hazardous waste processing at Will Rogers State Beach in the aftermath of the Palisades fire. The site is currently handling lithium-ion batteries from burned homes and electric vehicles, with plans to expand operations to process household hazardous waste. Government officials assured the public that all waste is being carefully sorted, contained, and transported to designated facilities in accordance with safety protocols. They emphasized the implementation of multiple containment layers and air monitoring systems to mitigate potential health and environmental risks.

Environmental and Public Health Concerns

Community members raised significant concerns about the lack of transparency regarding environmental impact assessments and the decision-making process behind selecting Will Rogers as a hazardous waste staging area. Many feel that the long-term health risks from exposure to toxins, particularly for children and vulnerable populations, have not been adequately addressed. Residents emphasized that the region has worked hard to clean up Santa Monica Bay, and this decision represents a major setback that could have repercussions for decades.

Specific concerns included:

- The **risk of airborne contaminants**, particularly from battery fires, and whether the current air monitoring systems are capable of detecting the smallest, most harmful particulates.
- The potential for **toxic runoff** from the waste site during storms, which could contaminate local waterways and beaches.
- The adequacy of **hazardous waste containment** and transport protocols to prevent spills or exposure during transit.
- Whether environmental assessments were conducted before the decision to use Will Rogers as a hazardous waste site, and why alternative locations were not considered.

Lack of Community Engagement and Government Oversight

Residents expressed frustration at being left out of the decision-making process, feeling that their concerns have been ignored in favor of expediency. While officials confirmed that the cleanup effort is under a strict timeline, they acknowledged that public information efforts have been insufficient. Many residents, particularly in Santa Monica, feel that the primary focus has been on addressing concerns in the Palisades, leaving their community in the dark about the risks and safety measures in place.

Additionally, concerns were raised about potential **jurisdictional conflicts** between agencies such as the **EPA, FEMA, and the Army Corps of Engineers**, and whether oversight gaps could lead to unsafe or incomplete cleanup efforts. Some questioned whether private contractors hired to assist in cleanup efforts were being **held accountable** for following best practices.

Impact on Santa Monica's Beaches and Coastal Environment

A major point of concern is the devastating accumulation of fire debris, toxic ash, and hazardous materials washing onto Santa Monica's shores. Residents have reported seeing thick layers of ash and soot, particularly near storm drains, with some people experiencing physical reactions such as burning eyes and skin irritation upon contact.

- Lack of clarity on beach safety: Many residents and visitors are unaware of the potential toxicity of the debris, with some unknowingly exposing themselves and their children to hazardous materials.
- Environmental consequences: There are fears about how the toxins will bioaccumulate in the marine ecosystem, affecting fish, marine mammals, and the broader food chain.
- City of Santa Monica's inability to respond: City officials have admitted that they lack the equipment and resources needed to clean the beaches, and they are seeking state or federal assistance.

Officials at the meeting did not have clear answers on **who is responsible for long-term beach remediation**, though they promised to follow up with relevant agencies.

Calls for Action

- A formal town hall or public meeting where residents can receive clear answers from agencies responsible for cleanup and environmental monitoring.
- A commitment to long-term testing and monitoring of air, soil, and water quality, with publicly available results.
- A coordinated response to beach contamination, with state or federal assistance for cleanup.
- Clear guidelines and safety **information** for residents about potential hazards and necessary precautions.

Conclusion

The meeting highlighted serious gaps in communication and environmental oversight that must be addressed to ensure public safety and effective disaster recovery. While government officials reassured residents that all necessary precautions were being taken, they acknowledged the need for better transparency, public engagement, and long-term environmental accountability. Residents remain deeply concerned about health risks, environmental damage, and the future of their coastline, urging authorities to take stronger action in mitigating the disaster's ongoing effects.

Officials acknowledged ongoing challenges and committed to following up on unanswered questions, particularly regarding beach cleanup efforts, Army Corps involvement, and future environmental monitoring.

Summary of Operational Details at Will Rogers State Beach Hazardous Waste Site

Current Operations at Will Rogers

The Will Rogers site is currently being used for hazardous waste processing as part of the Palisades fire cleanup. At this stage, the primary focus is on handling lithium-ion batteries from homes and vehicles affected by the fire.

Current Materials Being Processed:

- Lithium-ion batteries from cars (EVs) and residential energy storage systems (e.g., Powerwalls).
- The batteries are the only material currently being staged and processed at Will Rogers.
- Other hazardous waste (e.g., household chemicals, asbestos, dioxins) is being handled separately at different locations.

Future Expansion Plans:

- A household hazardous waste staging area is planned for Will Rogers.
- This staging area will be used to segregate, drum, and prepare hazardous materials for transport.

Processing & Containment of Lithium-Ion Batteries

Initial Collection:

- Survey teams (EPA and contractors) identify battery locations in fire-damaged areas.
- Battery-containing structures that are too unsafe to access immediately are labeled as “deferred sites” for later recovery.
- Once identified, teams assess whether the battery is intact or damaged.

Containment and Transportation:

- If the battery is intact, it is wrapped in Tyvek (a heavy-duty protective material) and sealed.

- If the battery is damaged but still intact, it is placed in 55-gallon poly drums.
- If a battery has melted or fragmented, the debris is bagged, sealed, and drummed separately.

On-Site Processing:

- At Will Rogers, some large EV battery packs are peeled open by excavators to separate battery cells.
- Batteries with residual charge ("hot batteries") are tested and, if necessary, submerged in brine solution to neutralize energy.
- If a thermal event (fire) occurs, the burning material is immediately submerged in a water bath to stop combustion.

Safety & Air Monitoring Measures

To mitigate risks from hazardous material handling, multiple containment and monitoring strategies are in place.

Triple-Layer Containment System:

- A plastic liner serves as a protective base.
- A geotextile mat is placed over the liner to prevent damage.
- A rubberized work surface is added to allow safe handling of materials.

Fire Safety and Emergency Response:

- Batteries are assessed for “stranded energy”—cases where a battery appears dead but may still hold a charge.
- If a battery arcs or sparks, it is immediately placed into a brine tank for safe deactivation.
- Fire risk is considered low due to these precautions, but there is a contingency plan for flare-ups.

Air Quality Monitoring:

- Four air monitoring stations are placed at the perimeter of the site.
- Mobile air monitors are repositioned as needed based on wind patterns.

- A 15-minute rolling average alert system is in place—if emissions exceed a set limit, operations pause for assessment.
- Recent false alarms have been caused by dust from dried mud, not from hazardous emissions.

Transportation & Disposal of Hazardous Waste

- **Shipping & Containment:**
 - Sealed 55-gallon drums and poly drum containers are used for safe transport.
 - Large battery components are stored in steel containers before being shipped out.
 - Some batteries are being sent to Nevada for recycling, though final disposal plans are still being confirmed.
- **Route & Emergency Response Plan:**
 - Waste is transported via Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) to the I-10 and I-405.
 - All shipments have manifests and placards indicating their contents.
 - In the event of a spill or accident, emergency response teams are immediately deployed to clean up and secure the site.

Deferred Sites & Army Corps of Engineers Coordination

- Some areas in the fire zone were deemed too hazardous to access for battery retrieval.
- These “deferred sites” require coordination with the Army Corps of Engineers for structural stabilization.
- Once Army Corps teams remove dangerous debris, EPA teams will re-enter to extract remaining batteries and hazardous materials.

Concerns About Beach Contamination & Waterways

Community members expressed concerns about toxic ash and debris washing onto the beaches, particularly near storm drains.

- **Extent of Contamination:**
 - Residents reported seeing thick layers of soot and ash accumulating along the shoreline.

- Some have experienced burning eyes and skin irritation after being near affected areas.
- Reports indicate toxic materials may have spread over 100 miles into the Pacific Ocean.
- **Lack of Clear Cleanup Plan for Beaches:**
 - The City of Santa Monica has stated it lacks the resources to clean up the beach.
 - It remains unclear which agency is responsible for beach and coastal remediation.
 - Officials committed to escalating the issue to state and federal agencies.

Projected Timeline for Cleanup Completion

- Lithium-ion battery removal: 30–60 days depending on remaining workload.
- Household hazardous waste collection: 60–70% complete, with additional work ongoing.
- Long-term cleanup (including deferred sites): Several months or longer, depending on Army Corps coordination.
- Beach and water remediation: No clear timeline as responsibility is still undetermined.

Community members want more transparency and oversight, especially regarding long-term environmental monitoring.

Next Steps & Community Engagement

- EPA will provide further clarification on hazardous material shipments and air quality monitoring.
- Liaison officials will communicate with Santa Monica and state agencies regarding beach contamination concerns.
- Residents are pushing for a formal town hall or public forum to receive clear answers from agencies handling the cleanup.
- Continued monitoring will be needed for long-term environmental and health impacts.
- Schedule a tour of the Will Rogers Sorting Site