Small California town fears birth defects linked to toxic waste

By Heather O'Neill, CNN Special Investigations Unit

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Small California town fears birth defects linked to toxic waste - CNN.com

In 3 years, 10 babies in Kettleman City, California, have been born with birth defects. Residents blame a variety of pollution, including a toxic waste dump. Government reports say the dump is not a hazard. The latest on plans to expand the waste site on tonight's "Campbell Brown" 8 p.m. ET

Kettleman City, California (CNN) -- Spring in California's San Joaquin Valley is seemingly idyllic, with rolling hills and miles of fruit orchards. But what's happening in the small town of Kettleman City has people scared.

In the past three years, 10 babies in Kettleman City, California, have been born with birth defects, including cleft palates and heart problems. Four cases were reported in 2008 and there was another possible case that same year.

According to the California Department of Public Health and California Birth Defects Monitoring Program, those four cases in Kettleman City are higher than expected. Nationally, the Birth Defects Monitoring Program lists one out of every 33 babies as born with a birth defect.

Three infants have died, including Maria Saucedo's daughter, Ashley.

"It's such a small town and such a large problem. We want to give our children life, not death," said Saucedo. "When Ashley was born, the doctors told me that there was something wrong with her. They told me that Ashley wouldn't live more than one or two months."

Despite a weak immune system, Ashley managed to live for almost 10 months. She died of a blood infection on January 24, 2009. Through tears, Saucedo said, "I apologized for not taking her earlier to the hospital, but the doctors told me that it wasn't my fault, that with babies like this, this is what happens."

But Saucedo wants to know why it happened to her and the other
mothers living here.

Kettleman City is one of the poorest towns in the state. Maricela Mares Alatorre, who works as a teacher, grew up there.

"It's a really small town," said Alatorre. "Most people have been here for generations. I like to call it the Mayberry feeling with a Latino twist."

But unlike Mayberry, the 1,500 people of this farming community have no grocery store, no high school and few sidewalks. The town, which is surrounded by farms, is polluted. It is plagued with poor air quality, unsafe drinking water and exposure to pesticides. Kettleman City's water does not meet EPA standards, because of high levels of naturally occurring arsenic. The state and EPA have found poor air quality throughout the San Joaquin Valley. Kettleman City is surrounded by agriculture and is exposed to heavy use of pesticides. Because of its location right off Highway 41, there also is a lot of emissions pollution.

The major concern for many people in Kettleman City, however, lies just four miles outside town. It is the largest toxic waste site west of the Mississippi. The site is operated by the waste disposal firm Waste Management, which said that last year 400,000 tons of hazardous waste -- including lead and cancer-linked PCBs found in plastics -- was dumped there. Every day, hundreds of trucks pour in and out.

Some residents believe the birth defects could be linked to the waste site.

Waste Management has said its Kettleman Hills facility operates safely and fully protects human health and the environment. The site has been inspected by four separate local, state and federal entities since 2007. All concluded the facility operates safely and does not affect local residents. Waste Management has agreed to cooperate with investigations into the community's concerns.

Tension between Waste Management and the community goes back decades. Residents led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson waged a battle against Waste Management in 1991 to stop a toxic waste incinerator from being built. They won.

Now the residents of Kettleman City are fighting again, this time over a proposed waste site expansion, for which their local officials voted.

For Alatorre, environmental activism is in her genes.

"I'm a second-generation activist," she said. Alatorre has been fighting against the waste site expansion and fighting for a state health investigation into the birth defects for nearly two years. She and others are upset that the county voted to expand the waste site before a full investigation was completed.

"We don't want an expansion because we feel like there are a lot of health problems in town and we're not necessarily attributing it to the dump, but we feel like with all of the other environmental factors we face, why add more to it?"

In December, the Kings County board asked the state for a health investigation into the birth defects, but one week later they voted in favor of granting a permit to allow the waste site to expand.

Ingrid Brostrom, an attorney with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said, "If there is any potential that these birth defects are caused by environmental contaminants, then we shouldn't be introducing any new contaminants. There should not be an expansion of the existing hazardous waste dump. It is essential the county knows what is causing these birth defects before the
hazardous waste site can be expanded.*

Activists and residents have filed a lawsuit against Kings County in an effort to stop the waste site expansion.

In a press release, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's office said he has "directed his State Department of Public Health and Environmental Protection Agency to expand their investigation into what could be causing an abnormal percentage of birth defects in the small farming town."

For Saucedo and the other mothers of Kettleman City, an investigation can't come soon enough.

"I want a response and I want it quickly. Nobody's given us any answers and children continue to be born sick," said Saucedo.

*This report has been way overdue I am 23 and from Kettleman City and have been talking about this for over five years. How many people have to die before attention is given to this and an effort is made to clean up this environment? Much food is grown in this area, is the food grown here contribu...more

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birth defect is just a bad adaptation without radiation/cancer/birth defects life would be a single celled organism

darthSteven

darthSteven

darthSteven

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**darthSteven**

why do you think the japanese are so smart????? Hiroshima and nagasaki

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**lexilulu18**

Is this what America come to? Killing Innocent children because we like to spray deadly fumes to keep BUGS off fruit. Making things that could cause the world to end and threatening to shoot it at other country's. This is what hap penes to the crap that we don't want anymore! And it's killing BABIES...more

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**CVR2**

Oh and one more thing, learn ENGLISH!

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**jamesef07**

Sounds like a great town for Republicans and their Lobbyist to retire to. They can sit on thier porches and drink a cold brew called "Waste Management", and reflect on all the good they have done for society.

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**Meggie0**

So I guess you live off the land and wear deerskins? And certainly you don't own a refrigerator or an automobile, right?

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**tay123**

The Waste Management Hazardous Waste Facility is certainly not the only problem in Kettleman City. Lets not forget to mention the extreme crime rate, gang involment, drug use, and lack of education happening in this "poor, small town". OPEN YOUR EYES! It even mentions above that there is a large amount...more

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**tay123**

Oh and also the obesity rate here isnt the lowest her either... birth defects arent the only problem they're having with their children.

6 hours ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

**Guest**

each time you drink alcohol you drink "toxic waste" and damage your genotype, for females AND males

7 hours ago | Like (1) | Report abuse

**Meggie0**

Don't leave out meth. Many children are brought up in homes where meth is cooked and cigarettes of all...
kinds are smoked.

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AnneSD

It seems like quite a few people call these folks stupid for wanting to stay in the town where their families have lived for generations. What if it was your backyard? This town is only about 30 miles from a major Naval Air Station. Has anybody checked to see if the people living there also have a hi ...more

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92.7% hispanics? I doubt they have been living there for generations...lol

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BlackGOD2

I say dismantle all toxic polluting bloodsucking corporations who are destroying the planet! They are the TRUE terrorists!

I wish there was a M.E.N.D. in this greedy God forsaken "country."

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Guest

Well the best thing to do is to not buy a car, gasoline, computers batteries turn on the light switch then those people will go out of business try it it really works!

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Guest

It's just a question of economy when the economy is bad people try and companies try to save which leads to crimes against the environment and of course the poor people suffer always most, cause nobody would dump toxic waste in a gated community. So basically illegal immigrants get their genotype scr ...more

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baboons

Most companies have no regard for the next generation. Why should a pesticide company care if their product creates birth defects down the road when it can make them a profit today?

7 hours ago | Like (2) | Report abuse

rodanside

BUT. There's an In-N-Out burger there.

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motherofson

You would have thought after Love canal we would have learned. When I saw the WM sign in this vid i cringed. Get the people out of there. Toxic waste means its toxic. How sad. Wondering what the cancer rate is there. Im sure its easy to find. I would think its high imho my prayers go out to everyone ...more

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hithendra

We need Julia Roberts from Erin Brokovich here !!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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CoCo56

Why is there a question mark after this article's title? How many people have to be poisoned before it becomes a statement - not a question?

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dgatwood

There's a question mark because arsenic is known to cause birth defects. Given that unsafe levels of arsenic are present in the drinking water due to "natural" deposits, it's actually pretty unlikely that the waste disposal company is at fault here.

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Sandywandy

I agree. But be careful folks, there are those out there who want to limit government involvement.....hmmm who should we call upon for help?

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mel36

Here's a problem that faces the country, our government uses testing on rats, mice and other rodents to determine the affects of pesticides on our endocrine system. Our endocrine system is more closely related to an amphibian than to rodents. What happens to the amphibians that are exposed to these ....more

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Guest

That de-regulation at work! See how it helps the economy and kills the babies...great for America...who the baby killers now?

7 hours ago | Like (2) | Report abuse

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