

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

Casmalia Landfill Still Toxic After All These Years

By Mark James Miller May 12, 2019

Before reaching the town proper you pass a sign, “Casmalia Landfill.” Here is where the tragedy of Casmalia begins, and 30 years after the landfill closed, the story is far from over. It is the last thing you would expect to find in this small, isolated community set among the green rolling hills of northern Santa Barbara County.

The story began in 1973, when the landfill opened. Over the next 16 years these 252 bucolic acres were the recipient of a mind-boggling 5.6 billion pounds of toxic waste. PCBs, acids, solvents, lead, copper, pesticides and oil field sludge were brought here, truckload after truckload, to be dumped and left to meld into a noxious, foul-smelling stew that by the 1980s was so overpowering at times that the local school had to be closed.

Residents of Casmalia became ill with respiratory problems, and 72 local physicians expressed concern at the rising number of miscarriages and stillbirths in Casmalia. Several deaths were attributed to the fumes from the landfill, but a direct connection was never proven.

“It was awful,” Casmalia resident Terry Stricklin recalls. She remembers “hundreds of trucks” bringing their loads of toxic materials and going up to the dumpsite, day after day.

What was especially egregious to Terri and other locals is that the site’s owner began accepting Class-1 waste — the most toxic kind — in 1980 and did not bother to notify the local residents. It was then that they truly began to

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have their health affected by the landfill, and as time went on and more waste arrived, their health problems got worse. This was also when the people of Casmalia decided it was time to do something about the landfill.

This proved easier said than done, however.

“Everyone just blew us off at first,” Terri said. When they took their concerns to the state level, the Department of Health Services refused to take them seriously. Dr. Ken Kizer, then the director, dismissed their complaints as “toxic superstition” and would not investigate. As late as 1987, Health Services was still insisting the Casmalia landfill posed “no immediate threat” to human life.

“That was a slap in the face,” said Terri, but the people persisted, engaging in acts of civil disobedience such as dumping bales of hay in front of the entrance to the landfill. In 1985, 11 people, including members of the environmental group Greenpeace, were arrested for placing themselves in front of trucks attempting to enter the site. In 1988 they rallied at the state capital in Sacramento, and in 1989 their protests derailed a proposal to expand the site.

“It took us nine years,” Terri said, but at long last, in 1989, the Casmalia landfill was closed. The EPA took over, and in 2001 it was declared a Superfund site. In June 2018

then-EPA Director Scott Pruitt announced a “comprehensive final cleanup” plan for Casmalia, a plan that is expected to take five years and cost \$60 million.

According to Liveability.com, the population of Casmalia has shrunk to 116. The Casmalia Corner Grocery Store has gone out of business, a “For Rent”

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sign sits forlornly in the window. The streets are quiet. Some of the houses on Point Sal Road appear to be empty. The most distinctive sign of life is all the cars parked around the famous Hitching Post restaurant.

Terri Stricklin believes the dumpsite, while officially no longer a danger to public health, will never truly be safe for people. She and other Casmalians vow to pass on what happened to future generations, so no one forgets.

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