

A stinky landfill torments its neighbors in the northern Valley

Residents say the smell can sometimes be unbearable, and irritates throats, noses, and eyes.

by **Ashley Orona** and **Dan Ross** 03/11/2025 11:28 am



Last year, 2,187 complaints — a 20-year record — translated into 65 notices of violation at Sunshine Canyon Landfill. Credit: Ashley Orona / LA Public Press

In Granada Hills, at the northern tip of the San Fernando Valley, residents are surrounded by mountains, walking trails, and parks. But they can't seem to enjoy all the natural beauty because the neighborhood's other major defining feature is a giant, stinky landfill.

"It's just rotten trash. It's really distinctive. You can't miss it," said Jacqui Cunz, who for nine years, has lived about a mile from Sunshine Canyon Landfill in Sylmar.

Some days the smell is simply an annoyance. Other days it is strong enough to burn people's nostrils and make their eyes water and throats itch. When that happens,

Cunz prefers to stay inside. But even when she seals all of her doors and windows shut, she said the smell can still creep in.

In the summer, residents said the smell worsens. And on windy days, plastic bags and paper trash blow onto their manicured lawns. Others said they have to clean up layers of dirt in their yards from the landfill operator constantly [importing soil](#), and using it to cover the trash.

“It’s a bummer because everybody loves living here, everybody loves the area,” said Cunz. “Not when you wake up to smells almost everyday.”

The strong odors inundate the neighborhood as frequently as a few times a week. Meg Volk, who has lived in the area for 33 years, said in the past month she has made 11 calls to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, or AQMD, the region’s air regulatory agency, to report strong odors from the landfill.

There’s been a few times where Volk has taken a chance and slept with the window open in her bedroom but was awoken by putrid smells early in the morning. Even if it’s 2 a.m., she said she gets up to call AQMD because she’s “so pissed.”

In January, AQMD received [118 complaints](#) from locals about odor and issued three notices of violation. Jan. 6 looked like a particularly smelly morning, with [27 complaints just minutes apart](#), with many coming from addresses nearby Van Gogh Charter School.

The community’s frustrations aren’t new — the landfill has been a nuisance neighbor for decades, and not just for Granada Hills, but other nearby neighborhoods. But the problems appear to have accelerated over the past couple of years. [The landfill is also slated to take in fire ash and debris from January’s devastating Palisades and Eaton](#)

[fires](#) — putting a renewed focus on decades of complaints from local residents.

Last year, regulators issued 65 separate notices of violation for a record annual number of public odor complaints for the facility. According to publicly available data, this number is significantly higher than for the other three solid waste landfills in LA and Simi Valley taking in ash and debris from January’s fires in Altadena and Pacific Palisades. AQMD has filed a petition for an abatement order against the landfill operator, Phoenix-based Republic Services, to try to force it to comply with state and local rules on nuisance odors. A [hearing for the order](#) is scheduled for later this month.

In response to questions about Sunshine Canyon’s compliance history and the complaints by local residents, a Republic Services media representative wrote that the company has “comprehensive safety and environmental programs in place,” including a “state-of-the-art liner system,” and “robust gas collection system to help ensure material is managed safely and responsibly.”

Jane Williams, executive director of California Communities Against Toxics, an environmental advocacy organization, said she doesn’t believe the operators are doing nearly enough to protect the community. “Everyone knows that this landfill is completely out of control,” she said.

“It never should have been put there in the first place”

The Sunshine Canyon Landfill started life back in the 1950s as an illegal dump. People would pull up to the edge of the canyon and tip into it all sorts of garbage and waste.

In 1958, the city of Los Angeles issued to Republic Services a permit for a 40-acre landfill. Since then, it has grown into the largest dump site in the county, said Wayde Hunter, president of the North Valley

Coalition of Concerned Citizens, a nonprofit that has historically opposed any expansion to the landfill and has advocated for action by local authorities on years of odor complaints by community members. And he's not happy about it.

"It never should have been put there in the first place," said Hunter, who explained that the canyon is in the notoriously windy Newhall Pass. "What happens in the landfill happens in our houses. And we're stuck with this stinking landfill until 2037," he added, highlighting its planned closure date, when it's expected to reach capacity.

Compared to other states, California's solid waste landfills are among the most strictly regulated, said Craig Benson, a member of the National Academy of Engineering with decades of experience on the topic. "They're really very careful and very thoughtful about the way they regulate landfills," he said.

But that doesn't mean landfills are necessarily safe or pleasant to live near, said Nick Lapis, director of advocacy with [Californians Against Waste](#), a nonprofit pushing for better waste management practices and an overall reduction in waste-streams. He pointed to LA County's Chiquita Canyon Landfill, [which recently closed](#) due to a hard-to-quench chemical reaction within the body of the trash causing it to heat up, at the same time exacerbating air emissions and odors stemming from the facility.

"The El Sobrante Landfill [in Riverside County] [is also having a subsurface fire](#), which I didn't even know about until this morning," said Lapis, recently. "It's pretty clear that our requirements aren't especially protective, even if they're stricter than the federal rules. It's a pretty low bar."



Sunshine Canyon Landfill is tucked into the hills. Credit: Ashley Orona / LA Public Press

2,187 complaints in one year

The AQMD issues notices of violations to landfills in its region when inspectors can confirm that public nuisance complaints are directly attributed to the facility — typically from at least six separate households, or from a school when children are present.

After Sunshine Canyon took additional steps around 2014 to [better manage](#) odors and [air emissions](#), public complaints dropped off precipitously. But they've spiked again over the past two years. In 2023, 1,721 odor complaints resulted in 61 notices of violation. Last year, 2,187 complaints — a 20-year record — translated into 65 notices of violation.

Though notices of violation can come with a fine, no financial penalties have been issued to Sunshine Canyon since the start of 2023. An AQMD spokesperson explained that the agency is still in the process of negotiating potential penalties, with delays due in part to disruptions from the January fires.

The facility also faces regulatory actions for the way it has managed rainwater runoff over the past two years, exacerbated by two unusually wet winters.

In May 2023, the Regional Water Quality Control Board issued Sunshine Canyon a

[notice of violation](#) for 11 separate water discharge and stormwater violations requiring corrective actions, like allowing waste to wash into water drainage facilities or watercourses.

The growing criticism against operations at Sunshine Canyon in recent years provides a backdrop to the more recent public outcry over plans to deliver fire ash debris to the facility, with serious questions over exactly what's in the ash.

During a recent [virtual townhall](#), Dr. Muntu Davis, the county health officer at the LA County Department of Public Health, said the ash “can be toxic and dangerous, depending on what burned.” [Officials in Hawaii](#) tested the wildfire ash left after the 2023 fires and found elevated levels of potentially toxic lead, arsenic, cobalt, and copper.

Sanjay Mohanty, an associate professor at UCLA's Samueli School of Engineering, said he's not unduly concerned about the ash going to the landfill provided extra monitoring is performed as a precaution, and the findings are made accessible to the public to assuage concerns.

“There should be a high frequency of monitoring, and monitoring at more locations around the community,” said Mohanty. “I think transparency is key here.”

Will this be done at Sunshine Canyon? Not exactly. There will be no additional air monitors positioned at and around Sunshine Canyon, according to AQMD spokesperson Rainbow Yeung.

The agency, however, has begun conducting “field activities” at landfills set to receive the fire ash, Yeung added, including unannounced on-site inspections and community surveillance. It also plans to respond “to public complaints submitted by local residents, emphasizing schools and

other locations that may have vulnerable populations.”

But critics say that's not enough.

“Those are not just odors the nearby residents are smelling,” said Williams, the anti-pollution advocate with California Communities Against Toxics, referencing federal air emissions data from 2020. These “[dangerous air pollutants](#),” she said, include almost 45 tons of sulphur dioxide (which is responsible for the odor complaints), 16 tons of particulate pollution, 33 tons of nitrogen oxide, and almost six tons of volatile organic compounds.

Sunshine Canyon has also long been a [massive emitter](#) of methane — more than 17 thousand tons of it in 2020 alone, according to federal data. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas and primary contributor to the formation of ground-level ozone, a dangerous air pollutant. Landfills in general are [one of the biggest emitters of methane](#) in California. Typically, [methane is extracted](#) through a series of wells and pipes before being flared off or recycled as a fuel. The state, however, could be doing a much better job at making landfill operators plug the problem, said Lapis with Californians Against Waste.

The California Air Resources Board is [considering an update](#) to its 2010 “[Landfill Methane Regulation](#),” in part because the current approach to methane monitoring is ineffective and inefficient, experts say. The updates come as new research shows emissions are significantly higher than previously estimated, according to the board.

Methane isn't the only problem chemical at Sunshine Canyon. In 2019, leachate (the liquid that seeps through landfills) and non-drinking water groundwater testing at the facility found [per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS](#), a vast class of

chemicals found in everyday products, from non-stick cookware to clothes to carpets. Some of the most ubiquitous PFAS are known to be toxic to humans.

A subsequent [report](#) found that the PFAS concentrations in the leachate at Sunshine Canyon was within the expected range, and no further sampling was recommended. But as our understanding of PFAS grows, so does the problem. A [recent study](#) found that PFAS are potentially leaving landfills at a greater rate through the air than through water. Limited testing means it's wholly unclear the extent of PFAS pollution leaving Sunshine Canyon, and how.

Veronica Herrera, a UCLA associate professor of urban planning and political science, said that while safe disposal technologies exist, landfills typically have “just so many associated problems.”

Herrera was part of a team that [last year found](#) residents living around landfills — often in low-income, vulnerable communities — are overburdened by the risks from plastic pollution, like inhaling and ingesting microplastics.

“It’s important to think about who can distance themselves from waste, and who can’t,” she said

To address changing weather patterns, Republic Services has regraded certain areas of the landfill to prevent ponding, modified berms to prevent erosion and better manage more rainfall alongside other erosion controls, and improved the permanent drainage structures, according to the company’s spokesperson. It has also installed 100 vertical gas extraction wells within the last year to better manage odors, with 100 more scheduled for installation this year.

“We’ve also installed more than 10,000 linear feet of horizontal or slope collectors to

help enhance gas collection. We have deployed new vapor and misting systems throughout the landfill, and a dedicated Odor Patrol Team patrols the site and nearby neighborhoods every day,” the spokesperson said in an email.

These steps have not appeased the residents living in the landfill’s shadow.

A showdown is coming

Meg Volk’s backyard in Granada Hills with a grassy lawn, pool, and spa looks like the kind pictured in home improvement magazines. She used to enjoy hosting friends and barbecues. But she has stopped inviting guests over to visit.

“It’s just so annoying that you just cannot enjoy your own personal property,” said Volk.

Jacqui Cunz can see the landfill from her backyard. That wasn’t always the case — but the landfill has grown and become more visible over the nearly 20 years she’s lived there. When the mountain vegetation is dry and brown, the landfill blends in with the mountain ranges. When the mountains are green, Cunz said, the dump looks like a “scar” along the hillside.

Granada Hills resident Tiffany Sayaphupha does not consider Republic Services to be “good stewards” of the neighborhood. She said the company is not doing enough to contain and handle the smells from the regular household trash it handles. And she’s not confident the operator will do its due diligence in handling [the additional fire debris going to the landfill](#).

“We’re at their mercy,” said Sayaphupha.

Sayaphupha has children who attend Van Gogh Charter School, located about two miles away from the landfill. She and other parents are especially concerned about the possible long-term health consequences of

odors and incoming fire debris on their children.

At the school's dismissal time last Tuesday, it was warm enough to not wear a jacket. But there was a breeze, especially in the shade. Neighbors walked their dogs at Bee Canyon Park, and a few teenage boys were skateboarding nearby in a dried up reservoir.

Asked about the landfill, some parents said they'd been notified about smells in the past, others said no.

A spokesperson for the Los Angeles Unified School District said in an email that if odors are present at levels that are determined to be "strong" or "disruptive" during school hours, the Van Gogh principal is expected to implement an "indoor activity" schedule until odors disappear. The Van Gogh administration should also submit a complaint to AQMD and the district's Office of Environmental Health and Safety.

Eric Fefferman, a former Van Gogh parent and Granada Hills North Neighborhood Council member, said at a meeting last month that he recently pulled his son from the school because the odor was "so strong."

On a recent morning, Leonardo Muñoz, another Van Gogh parent, said a putrid trash smell was coming from the landfill as he dropped off his child at school, which is not uncommon.

He immediately called AQMD to report it.

"I think it does affect our health at least to some degree, whether you have kids or not," said Muñoz.

The community's growing chorus of criticism will come to a head at the AQMD's offices in Diamond Bar on March 19, when the hearing on the petitioned abatement order is scheduled to go ahead. Disillusioned community members aren't holding their breath the hearing will result in action. "Don't expect miracles but these are the only people who can make them do anything like reduce tonnage or reduce hours if only temporarily until the odors are abated," wrote Wayne Hunter, in an email to the community last week.

"[Residents] don't want to take it anymore," said Cunz. "It's like nobody is doing anything in the political realm to listen to our problems or help us."

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Ashley Orona is a journalist and community organizer from South Central Los Angeles. She loves spending time with her family, supporting local businesses, and finding new scenic views around LA.