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EPA cites smelter in Pilsen over lead

But regulators say it meets most laws

By Michael Hawthorne, Tribune staff reporter. Tribune staff reporter Darnell Little contributed to this report

July 7, 2005

In the eerie glow of street lamps, smoke rolls down a Pilsen street next to a smelter that churns more toxic lead into the air than any other factory in the Chicago area.

Captured on videotape by a small group of neighborhood activists, the late-night burst of pollution has fueled an aggressive campaign to clean up the H. Kramer and Co. plant, which has been recycling scrap metal near Racine Avenue and Cermak Road since the 1920s.

Neighbors are fed up with metallic-tasting smoke and chronic odors from the plant, a relic of an era when factories were built near houses in dense urban enclaves.

Federal records show H. Kramer released 3,400 pounds of lead into the air during 2003, the last year for which figures are available. The next highest lead source in Cook County and the five collar counties released less than half that amount.

"Mayor [Richard] Daley says he wants Chicago to be the world's greenest city," said Leila Cepeda, who has lived in Pilsen most of her life and now lives and works a block from the H. Kramer plant. "How can you say that and allow them to keep putting out this pollution?"

Lead is a poisonous metal with no safe level of exposure that can cause behavioral problems and learning disabilities in children. It also can cause cancer. More than 11,600 people live within a half mile of the H. Kramer smelter, according to U.S. census data. About 90 percent are Latino.

Despite the lead it puts into the air, local, state and federal regulators say the plant generally complies with environmental laws and doesn't pose a threat to public health.

But the company occasionally has come under scrutiny from environmental regulators. On Wednesday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced that it had cited H. Kramer for minor violations of the Clean Air Act.

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City officials have inspected the plant 128 times since 1998, typically after telephone complaints from neighbors, according to a new report from the Chicago Department of Environment.

While citing several tickets written for noise and odor violations, the city's report advises H. Kramer to embark on a public relations campaign to highlight its "commitment to protect the environment."

Moreover, city environmental officials said, the company should plant trees around the plant to "give its facility a more friendly ambience instead of the current rugged steel appearance. Trees also can improve the air quality around them as well as mitigate the urban heat island effect."

The report also suggested "erecting a wall around the facility with a good choice of paint color," saying it could make the plant "less conspicuous and less distracting to the neighbors."

"I'm not sure how that is going to help," said Karen Sheets, spokeswoman for the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization, a neighborhood group. "We just want them to clean up and stop putting noxious smoke into the air."

Company officials did not return telephone calls requesting comment.

Sadhu Johnston, Chicago's new environment commissioner, said there is little the city can do about the plant's emissions, which are regulated under federal and state laws. H. Kramer was high on the department's watch list in the late 1990s, Johnston said. But he said the city hasn't received a complaint about the plant since April.

"We want to continue to have manufacturing in the city," he said. "That means jobs and economic development. But we want it to be clean and environmentally responsible."

State and city officials contend that routine inspections and consistent scrutiny have led H. Kramer to reduce air pollution by replacing aging equipment that melts scrap metal into brass and bronze ingots. The company also installed filters on its smokestacks.

Data yet to be publicly released will show that improvements at the plant cut lead emissions by about 60 percent last year, said Ron Burke, associate director of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

"The trend at H. Kramer is fewer and fewer emissions over time," Burke said.

State and city officials also said they are trying to address the neighborhood's concerns, including whether the plant is responsible for higher-than-expected lead levels in soil.

Activists prompted the state to take a closer look after their own tests alarmed regulators. Eight of 12 samples collected by the group and analyzed by an independent laboratory had lead levels above U.S. EPA guidelines for residential areas.

Results of the state's tests are expected later this summer. The agency also is conducting an analysis of data from air monitors, smokestack emissions and weather patterns to gauge whether H. Kramer is responsible for the lead in the soil or whether it could have been deposited over time from other factories and vehicles that once burned leaded gasoline.

"We're not scientists or specialists, but we know something is wrong when we walk outside and our eyes start watering from that metallic smoke," said Maria Chavez, a former Pilsen resident with family still living in the neighborhood. "I don't understand how that can be legal."

Pilsen factory cited for lead violations

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday issued air pollution citations to H. Kramer & Co., which emits the most lead in the six-county region.

TOP LEAD EMISSIONS IN SIX-COUNTY AREA, 2003 POUNDS OF
COMPANY CITY COUNTY AIRBORNE LEAD
H. Kramer & Co. Chicago Cook 3,400
J.C. Schultz Enterprises Inc. St. Charles Kane 1,509
Osram Sylvania Lake Zurich Lake Zurich Lake 1,255
Signode Bridgeview Cook 970
Chicago Castings Co. Cicero Cook 802
A. Finkl & Sons Co. Chicago Cook 614
Johnson Controls Battery Group Inc. Geneva Kane 516
Joliet Generating Station Joliet Will 503
Acme Packaging Riverdale Facility Riverdale Cook 446
Horsehead Resource Development Co. Inc. Chicago Cook 435
Source: U.S. EPA Toxics Release Inventory
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