

Former Exide employee says plant fabricated incident reports

Source claims facility officials were unwilling to improve safety standards



The Exide Technologies lead-acid battery recycling plant in Frisco is currently being demolished before the land surrounding the plant is remediated to meet federal environmental standards. Photo by Kelsey Kruzich.

By Anthony Tosie

From 2001 to 2012, Exide Technologies received 50 written notices of violation for a lack of federal compliance or unsafe working conditions at its Frisco lead-acid battery recycling plant.

Of the problems those 50 written notices were for, Exide only reported 10 to the investigating agency, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. In all, 27 of 101 inspection trips by the agency revealed violations. According to a former employee, however, the violations the company was cited for may not truly indicate the extent of its wrongdoing.

That employee claims plant officials told him what to write on incident reports – reports that he said represented “a great difference in the truth” between what was written and what really happened at the company’s Frisco plant.

The employee, who served in a managerial position at the plant, spoke to The Frisco Enterprise on the condition of anonymity.

“Every time we had a problem, my boss would tell me what to write,” he said. “I never wrote anything [in my own words]. He would tell me what to write, and I’d sign it.”

According to the former employee, the incidents were as frequent as every other week, though the company “never wanted to hear what [actually] happened.”

A TCEQ spokeswoman said she could not comment on whether or not an employee signing an incident report with false information would be illegal without being told what reports are in question. The former employee said he did not keep any documentation of reports as he didn't want to break the law himself.

The source said incidents resulted from a variety of problems, ranging from lightning storms that would knock out the plant's power to maintenance issues with plant equipment.

Power being knocked out was a particular issue, the source said, as vapors resulting from the lead-acid recycling system were no longer captured. Those vapors included lead particles, and long periods of lead exposure can result in chronic lead poisoning, which in turn can cause physical defects such as kidney damage.

Though the former employee never had direct contact with TCEQ officials, he said he saw the environmental agency's officials at the plant "quite frequently – like every month." Documents from the agency indicate its 101 investigative trips were made from 2001 until the plant closed late last year. Officials on those trips would scour the plant for any potential issues relating to state and federal environmental laws.

Prior to those visits, the source said employees were paid overtime to clean the plant extensively. The same initiative was made before visits by non-plant employees, such as trips by corporate managers. Outside of those events, however, the plant was rarely cleaned, the source said.

*"Every time we had a problem, my boss would tell me what to write. ... He would tell me what to write, and I'd sign it."
– Former Exide employee on incident reports*

"I was frustrated by that. Because if it's important to the company, let's make it right [and keep it safe]," he said. "But once visitors leave, let's keep it right – but they didn't care."

Exide never improved the safety of the plant during his tenure despite numerous requests for improvement, the source said. Plant officials were only concerned with "making your numbers," he said, referring to the amount of lead recycled at the plant.

"I guess we were probably producing \$200,000 worth of product every shift – \$600,000 worth of product every day," he said. "Yet [one time] we had six people working on [maintenance when the plant lost power]. We had one flashlight and one set of tools. What I needed was six flashlights and six sets of tools, but they wouldn't even give me that."

The former employee said he made several requests for plant upgrades, but all were ignored. He said the plant's carbon dioxide monitors were constantly beeping, indicating dangerous CO2 levels.

"The environment of operations was poisoning us," he said.

The Exide plant ceased operations last year following a \$45 million agreement with the city that will transfer a 180-acre buffer zone surrounding the plant to the city while the company will keep the 90 acres of land the plant occupies. As part of the requirements of the deal, Exide is required to clean the land to federally acceptable standards before transferring it to the city.

Frisco officials have hailed the move as a deal that will bring economic benefits to the city, as that land – located on the east side of the Dallas North Tollway – could bring major business and municipal projects to the area.

Local groups opposed to Exide have said the land will forever be tarnished as long as landfills containing waste are located on the 90 acres Exide is keeping. The company has agreed to excavate portions of the landfills that aren't compliant with federal standards; those portions will be treated to acceptable levels and placed back in the landfills, however.

When asked if he would feel comfortable visiting the land the city purchased from Exide when it's remediated to federally compliant levels, the former employee said he wouldn't.

"With the way it's going right now, I'll never take my children or my dog to that area," he said. "I studied petroleum engineering and geology in college, and I know the bad stuff sinks to the bottom. I will never [go there]. It'll be nice to have it gone, but I don't know how you patch that up. You have to pull up everything, wrap it up and get it gone."

When asked for comment regarding the former employee's claims, an Exide Technologies spokeswoman said the company "does not comment on unsubstantiated hearsay."