

## **Lead Waste Capped at Abandoned Smelter on U.S.-Mexico Border**

**SAN DIEGO, California**, January 28, 2009 (ENS) - Today the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency joined Mexico's environmental ministry, SEMARNAT, to mark the cleanup of a former Tijuana lead smelter that was abandoned with over 42,000 tons of lead in open pits or buried in drums and sacks.

While the nearby community demanded that all the waste from the U.S.-owned smelter be returned to the United States, the majority of it was capped onsite instead.

The smelter, Metales y Derivados, posed public health risks to the residents of nearby Otay Mesa. Bridging the cities of San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico, Otay Mesa is the largest commercial border crossing on the California/Mexico border.

"The Metales y Derivados cleanup effort is a model of binational partnership," said Laura Yoshii, the EPA's acting regional administrator for the Pacific Southwest region. "We're proud to be part of this joint effort with the Tijuana community and Mexican officials that has had a positive impact on the lives of the people living nearby."

Joining the officials from EPA and SEMARNAT were representatives from the state of Baja California; Mexico's federal enforcement agency, PROFEPA; members of the Colectivo Chilpancingo; Mexican elected officials; and grassroots environmental organizations, including the Environmental Health Coalition.

"The Environmental Health Coalition and our community action team in Tijuana, the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental, celebrate this historic accomplishment for the local community, for cross-border solidarity, and for the U.S. and Mexican governments who worked with the community to achieve the cleanup," said Amelia Simpson, director of the Border Environmental Justice Campaign at Environmental Health Coalition.



**Waste at Metales y Derivados** (Photo courtesy U.S. EPA)

The Metales y Derivados site is located just 600 yards from Colonia Chilpancingo, a low income neighborhood of more than 10,000 people.

People exposed to lead can become ill with symptoms that include loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, headache, joint or muscle aches, and anemia. Long term overexposure may result in severe damage to the nervous, urinary, and reproductive systems.

Owned by a U.S. company, the New Frontier Trading Corporation, Metales y Derivados recycled car and boat batteries for 12 years from 1972 through 1984, producing tons of waste, including lead slag and other toxics.

At the beginning of its operation, the company sent the slag to Europe for processing. But when new European environmental laws took effect in the 1980s, the operators found slag shipping too costly and

began dumping the waste on-site at the smelter.

In 1992, the facility was cited by Mexico's PROFEPA for environmental non-compliance, and in 1994, the site was abandoned by its owner.

In 1998, two community groups, one from each side of the border, applied to the environmental commission established under the North American Free Trade Agreement for help in getting the site cleaned up.

The groups asserted that New Frontier Trading Corporation, through its subsidiary Metales y Derivados, failed to repatriate to the United States the hazardous waste it generated, as required under Mexican law and the 1983 U.S.-Mexico La Paz Agreement requiring that hazardous waste from maquiladoras be returned to the country of origin.

Four years later, the commission issued a report acknowledging that the more than 6,000 tons of battery acid, lead, arsenic and other toxic substances stored at the Metales site potentially pose a "grave harm to human health" and recommended that corrective action be taken, but did not specify what action to take.



**Metales y Derivados after the cleanup** (Photo courtesy U.S. EPA)

In 2004, a binational partnership workgroup established as part of the U.S.–Mexico Border 2012 Program implemented a four-phase cleanup plan which included the initial removal of 2,000 tons of high risk wastes and the recent construction of a cap over the 42,000 tons of lead waste remaining onsite.

The Metales y Derivados property is now owned by the state of Baja California as a result of the cleanup and land-transfer agreement established in 2004 between the federal and state governments.

Baja California is exploring reuse options for the property, including the installation of solar panels to power local industry and a state environmental testing lab.