

# EPA apology to Cerritos clears the air

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**ENVIRONMENT:** Report incorrectly said the city had the highest cancer risk in the nation. Residents say they're relieved.

By Kelly Puente Staff Writer

CERRITOS — The city of Cerritos can now breathe a little easier.

In front of a room filled with more than 200 residents on Tuesday, officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency apologized for a national air-quality report that erroneously labeled Cerritos as having the highest cancer risk in the nation.

The report, called the 2002 National-Scale Air Toxics Assessment, sparked a media firestorm when it was released in June. And though the EPA and the South Coast Air Quality Management District have since declared the assessment grossly dated and inaccurate, city officials say they're struggling to repair a damaged reputation.

"I'm glad to hear 'I'm sorry,' because we haven't heard that from the EPA," said City Councilwoman Carol Chen, followed by a round of applause from residents.

Hoping to clear the air, the city on Tuesday held a town hall meeting at the Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts to

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**"This (air-quality report) was a great mistake. We want to assure that this doesn't happen to any other city."**

— Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-Santa Fe Springs

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explain the faulty EPA report.

The meeting was also attended by several EPA and AQMD officials, Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe and congresswomen Grace Napolitano and Linda Sanchez.

"This (air-quality report) was a great mistake," Napolitano said. "We want to assure that this doesn't happen to any other city."

The report released June 24 showed a small Cerritos neighborhood as having an unusually high cancer risk, with 95 percent of that risk coming from a cancerous chemical called hydrazine.

The EPA traced the source to the site of the Heraeus Metal Processing Plant in Santa Fe Springs, which reportedly spewed 1,250 pounds of the chemical in 1991 or earlier.

The AQMD immediately launched an inspection and determined that Heraeus now emits less than two pounds of the chemical each year — putting Cerritos at an average cancer risk for the area.

Moreover, they said information from 1991 was self-reported by the plant, then known as PCP Industries, and was likely an error.

EPA officials said the assessment relies on air-quality data from state and local agencies, and the erroneous information somehow was bungled between the three agencies.

The federal agency, however, admits that the unusually high numbers in Cerritos should have rung a bell with someone before the report hit the media.

"We are sorry that Cerritos suffered negative attention it did not deserve," the EPA said in a letter to the city. "We acknowledge that we should have done better in our preparation to

release this most recent NATA, and we are working on improvements."

Many residents at the town hall meeting expressed relief.

"I was concerned when I first heard about the cancer risk," said Marilyn Segal, a breast cancer survivor and resident for 41 years. "But now I feel much better, because I love Cerritos."

Longtime resident Randy Economy, however, said he was concerned about the effects of a plant the size of Heraeus on surrounding neighborhoods.

"That plant has no business being on this side of town," Economy told the City Council.

State records show that the Department of Toxic Substances Control has fined Heraeus thousands of dollars for multiple health and safety violations since the company took over the property 2001.

Records show the company has been fined multiple times for unauthorized storage of toxic waste, including hydrazine hydrate.

Dr. Julia Lester, who represents an environmental consulting firm the city hired to conduct its own air-quality study, said the company is looking into the facility's records.

"We haven't finished our own analysis, but at this point, we have not uncovered anything that gives us any immediate concern," Lester said.

Overall, Lester said, the massive error shows the need for better coordination between local, state and federal agencies.

"It's important to have transparency and communication between agencies," she said. "People rely on this data."

Officials also commended the city for its fast action.

"I really have to give credit to city leaders for responding forcefully and quickly," said Linda Sanchez. "Cerritos can breathe a big sigh of relief."

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