

News Briefs

Protesters demand several TCEQ employees be fired

Armed with poster-sized "pink slips," a group of 15 activists from the Texas Campaign for the Environment staged a peaceful protest Thursday outside the headquarters for the Texas Commission for Environmental Quality, demanding the removal of several TCEQ employees.

The protesters made the pink slips with the names of employees and the reasons for their termination written on them. The reasons for the requested dismissals ranged from failure to enforce environmental laws, allowing hazardous waste into municipal landfills and "being in bed with polluters."

The protest was in response to a TCEQ decision that reversed a previous ruling.

In mid-May, TCEQ forced Penske Truck Leasing to take responsibility for an accident that spilled 41,000 pounds of hazardous waste on I-35 in 1997. The material was dumped in a municipal landfill after the accident because state employees did not know it was "hazardous waste" that needed to be sent to a hazardous waste landfill.

On June 19, the commission ruled that the lead-laden material should be classified as "special waste," which requires less handling and regulation and can be added to regular municipal landfills, though the commission still wants it removed from its current location.

Campaign workers and Bob Gregory, the owner of the landfill, opposed the recent ruling. Gregory, who has been engaged in a lawsuit with Penske for four years, said TCEQ is breaking federal law.

"According to the federal definition, this is classified as hazardous waste," said Rachel Penticuff, a campaign intern. "By re-classifying it as special waste, TCEQ is breaking the law and not doing their job."

John Steib, TCEQ deputy director of Compliance and Enforcement, was one of the people the campaign wants to resign.

"Penske asked TCEQ that the waste be classified as special waste ... The agency has the authority to approve requests of reclassification," Steib said.

--Cyndee-Nga Trinh