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City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo Launches Environmental Justice Project

Concentrated Effort to Combat Urban Pollution Modeled After Delgadillo's Successful Neighborhood Prosecutor Program

LOS ANGELES – City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo today announced the creation of the Environmental Justice Enforcement and Compliance Team (EJECT), an unprecedented, comprehensive effort to combat environmental crimes plaguing the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Los Angeles.

Delgadillo's environmental justice project, the first of its kind for a municipal law enforcement agency, combines multi-agency inspections, criminal prosecution, civil litigation and community input to identify and take action against urban industrial pollution.

"Industrial polluters contaminate our water, soil and air, and they threaten the health of the children in some of our most disadvantaged neighborhoods," Delgadillo said. "My office has a responsibility to stick up for communities that lack the financial resources to take on polluters by themselves."

Delgadillo said that the environmental justice project will concentrate on clusters of "dirty" industries located in neighborhoods with disproportionate exposure to potential polluters, including Sun Valley, Wilmington, Boyle Heights and South Los Angeles.

The environmental justice project establishes a new way to prosecute environmental crimes, never before attempted by a municipal law enforcement agency.

"The environmental justice project will drive the enforcement of environmental, health and safety laws in a proactive and comprehensive way," Delgadillo said.

In the past, urban environmental enforcement was handled in a reactive and piecemeal fashion, Delgadillo said. The City Attorney's Office would typically wait until it received notices of violation from one of the over 30 city, county and state agencies, then proceed on a single violation.

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EJECT will coordinate multi-agency inspections of industrial facilities located in high-risk neighborhoods, allowing for aggressive prosecution on multiple counts against a single violator.

The environmental justice project also draws from Delgadillo's successful Neighborhood Prosecutor Program by assigning a deputy city attorney to work directly with the neighborhoods that bear the brunt of environmental injustice.

"Prosecutions alone cannot remedy 50 years of injustice," Delgadillo said. "We need the collaboration and commitment of all city, county and state agencies, and, most importantly, involvement from the community."

EJECT is housed in the Safe Neighborhoods Division of the City Attorney's Criminal Branch, and is headed by Deputy City Attorney Patty Bilgin. Bilgin has been a criminal prosecutor for nine years, and specializes in environmental law. Deputy City Attorneys Jaime Suarez and Von Manassian will work closely with Bilgin on criminal prosecution of environmental law.

Deputy City Attorney Gideon Kracov, who before joining the City Attorney's Office represented non-profit environmental justice organizations in cases against industrial facilities, will spearhead the civil litigation portion of Delgadillo's environmental justice project. Kracov, working with Delgadillo's neighborhood prosecutors, will serve as the principal liaison to Los Angeles residents on issues of environmental justice.

The environmental justice project will also reach out to industrial facilities to encourage compliance with environmental laws.

"My office is seeking environmental justice for our children by ensuring that potential polluters comply with every letter of every law on the books," Delgadillo said. "Voluntary compliance is the first option. But if polluters ignore the community's needs, we will continue to prosecute until the polluters clean up their act or get out of town."

Delgadillo's environmental justice project is a result of an internal reorganization, and requires no additional city staff or resources. Residents will benefit from an efficient use of existing resources with EJECT, since more than 30 city, county and state environmental agencies will collaborate to tackle a single neighborhood problem, Delgadillo said.

"The environmental justice project takes full advantage of limited resources to benefit the under-served neighborhoods of Los Angeles," Delgadillo said. "The synergy produced by multiple agencies working together will allow us to provide more service at less cost."

The new unit will oversee several of the office's ongoing environmental initiatives to increase enforcement of environmental laws in the city.

Since January 2003, the City Attorney's Office has coordinated the inspection of over 200 facilities and has filed more than 40 criminal cases relating to environmental violations.

Delgadillo began a focused effort to address environmental injustice with the Sun Valley Initiative, a multi-agency taskforce focused on inspecting auto dismantling yards, concrete, marble and gravel operations in the San Fernando Valley. To date, the Sun Valley Initiative has conducted 143 inspections for air, soil and groundwater contamination, including four multi-agency inspections at Bradley Landfill.

Another project to be incorporated into the environmental justice project is the Wilmington Initiative. Initiated on June 5, 2003, the effort has resulted in 18 criminal cases against Harbor-area businesses. On March 10 of this year, the Wilmington Initiative inspected the Valero Oil Refinery.

In October 2003, Delgadillo launched the Chrome Platers Initiative, which was designed to inspect a sample of the approximately 207 permitted chrome plating facilities in Southern California. Many of these companies are concentrated in South Los Angeles and Boyle Heights. As a result, 10 criminal charges were filed in February against Palace Plating, a chrome plating facility located across the street from 28th Street Elementary School in South Los Angeles.

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