

Union-Tribune.

TIJUANA

FORMER DUMP IS REVIVED



Cesar Luna of the EHC walked through battery waste and debris that filled the former battery recycling plant. 2000 U-T file photo

Toxic land made safe for public

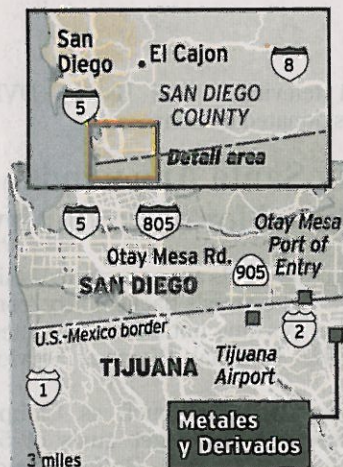
By Jose Luis Jiménez
STAFF WRITER

Thanks to a groundbreaking binational partnership, people will now play soccer on what was once called Mexico's most notorious toxic waste site.

The 4-acre parcel was home to Metales y Derivados, an American-owned lead smelter that dumped more than 42,000 tons of hazardous waste into the ground, according to environmental officials. People living in Ejido Chilpancingo, a residential area near the site, complained for years that the contamination made them sick.

Now the heavy metals and other contaminants are entombed in concrete, and mini-courts are painted on the clean, flat surface.

SEE Toxic, B3



SOURCE: SanGIS

AARON STECKELBERG / Union-Tribune



Members of the Environmental Health Coalition, residents and officials from both sides of the border celebrated the cleanup of Metales y Derivados yesterday. Above, schoolchildren played ball at the cleanup site. Bruce K. Huff / Union-Tribune

► **TOXIC**

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Site's owner moved to U.S. while under fire

At a ceremony yesterday marking the completion of the cleanup, Magdalena Cerda Báez, of the Environmental Health Coalition, thanked the officials for the rehabilitation work. The U.S. group helped local residents pressure government officials to clean up the property.

"Today proves that these problems can be resolved," Cerda said.

Metales y Derivados operated during the 1980s and the contamination was not discovered until 1992, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Two years later, owner José Kahn moved to San Diego to avoid arrest after Mexican authorities shut down the business and sought to charge him with violating environmental laws. Kahn has since died.

In 2004, the Mexican government and the EPA entered into a partnership to clean up the Otay Mesa property. It was the first project in a larger effort to identify and fix hazardous sites along the border that affect both nations, said Tom Huetteman, an EPA official who attended the ceremony. Also

present were his environmental counterparts from Mexico, and Baja California Gov. José Guadalupe Osuna Millán and Tijuana Mayor Jorge Ramos.

"This was a problem that needed to be addressed, and I'm glad it was a success," Huetteman said in an interview.

The property was littered for years with dozens of 55-gallon drums and sacks filled with lead waste; the business recycled car and boat batteries. Exact numbers are not known, but the EPA estimates more than 42,000 tons of waste was dumped at the site.

Children are especially susceptible to lead poisoning, which can accumulate in the nervous system and lead to se-

rious problems, notably lower intelligence and poor school performance.

The cleanup started in earnest in 2004 with the removal of about 2,000 tons of hazardous waste. The remainder, mostly soil contaminated with lead, was encased in concrete and buried on the site.

The final cleanup cost was estimated at \$2 million, with the EPA contributing about \$80,000.

The property, owned by the state government, eventually could be sold as an industrial site, according to Mexican officials.

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