

Health complaints linked to former NASA site in Downey

A toxic cleanup paved the way for Downey Studios. But people who worked on films there say they developed conditions from which they haven't recovered. The source of their problems remains a mystery.

By Richard Verrier

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In 34 years as a Hollywood prop maker, John Izumi rarely missed a day of work. Now he can barely pull himself out of bed.

His medical records describe a daunting array of ailments: chest pains, headaches, dizziness, memory loss, red blotches and pimple-like bumps. He says he has trouble breathing at night and wakes up with tremors.

Izumi traces these symptoms to the three months he spent at Downey Studios in 2004 and 2005 building sets for the science-fiction movie "The Island."

"It's like my body is breaking down," said the 55-year-old Burbank resident. "My life has changed ever since I worked out there."

Dozens of film production workers have similar complaints about Downey Studios, which occupies the site of a former NASA plant southeast of Los Angeles that produced spacecraft for the Apollo moon missions.

Part of the property was turned into a film production center early in this decade, after a cleanup intended to protect workers and the public from the toxic residue of years of aerospace research and manufacturing. The transformation was celebrated as an example of how old industrial sites, often a burden on communities, can be reclaimed for productive uses.

But carpenters, welders, electricians and other film production workers say they developed severe respiratory and other problems while working there and have never recovered.

Film workers have given the name "Downey flu" to one particular cluster of symptoms -- chronic congestion, headaches and rashes. Some have even refused to work there, a rare phenomenon in the tough, blue-collar world of set construction.

At least 34 people have filed workers' compensation claims over illnesses they trace to the studio complex. The Times obtained detailed records on 18 of the cases. In 11 -- including Izumi's -- independent physicians found that some or all of the symptoms were caused or aggravated by working at Downey Studios.

In three other cases, independent physicians -- specialists certified by the state to offer neutral opinions in workers' compensation cases -- said the ailments appeared to be work-related but further tests were needed to make a determination. The tests were never performed because insurance companies contested the doctors' findings and refused to pay for the tests.

In the four remaining cases, independent physicians said workers' symptoms were not work-related.

The source of the health problems is a mystery. Independent physicians generally do not try to pinpoint the precise cause of an illness. In their workers' compensation claims, in injury complaints reported to Cal/OSHA and in a civil lawsuit, film-production workers cited a variety of potential causes, including mold, dust churned up during renovations at Downey Studios and toxic chemicals detected in the soil.

Stuart Lichter, whose Industrial Realty Group operates Downey Studios, rejected the idea that conditions at the site made anyone sick.

"We've done an amazing amount to transform this property, and everything we've done has been totally responsible," said Lichter, founder and president of IRG.

David White, a lawyer for the company, said there was no evidence linking the workers' health problems to Downey. "A lot of these guys work with fairly toxic materials in their line of work," he said. "They've done all kinds of heavy, industrial work."

Gerald Caton, Downey city manager, vigorously defended the cleanup of the former NASA plant: "There's probably not a site in America that has been more thoroughly evaluated from an environmental point of view."

Film production workers typically are independent contractors hired through Hollywood craft unions. While working on a movie, they are employed by payroll services companies, which purchase insurance to cover work-related injuries and illnesses.

Those insurers rejected all the claims related to Downey Studios, saying the workers' problems stem from preexisting conditions or previous employment. Workers appealed within the state workers' compensation system, and insurance carriers have since settled about a third of the cases. In a few others, claimants tired of the battle and walked away with nothing.

At least 16 workers are still fighting for workers' compensation benefits. Ultimately, disputed cases are resolved through a trial before an administrative law judge, often several years after the claim was filed.

Most of the workers who blame their medical problems on Downey have continued to work on movie productions across Los Angeles, but some have stopped, saying they are too sick.

American International Group Inc., the workers' compensation insurer in most of the Downey Studios cases, declined to comment.

"What is clear is that there is a large number of people who have reported similar symptoms from working at the same location," said Saro K. Kerkonian, a Glendale lawyer representing eight of the workers. "That can't be brushed off as just coincidence."

Aerospace history

Downey Studios is one of the largest film production spaces in North America. Its converted hangars have 360,000 square feet of production space and an artificial lake the size of a football field.

Before the controversy over the health complaints and a broad downturn in film production, Downey Studios was one of the region's busiest film sites, hosting such productions as "Spider-Man," "The Italian Job," "Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines" and "Catch Me If You Can." More recently, "G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra," which opens next weekend, was filmed there.

The property, between Lakewood and Bellflower boulevards north of Imperial Highway, was a cradle of the nation's aircraft and aerospace industries. During World War II, Vultee Aircraft made heavy bombers there. After the war, North American Aviation conducted research on nuclear power and rocket propulsion.

In the 1960s, North American (later part of Rockwell International) landed a NASA contract to build a booster rocket and the command and service modules for the Apollo lunar program. Later, workers at Downey made and assembled components for six space shuttles.

Boeing Co. acquired Rockwell's aerospace and defense divisions in 1996 and shut the plant three years later.

The city of Downey drafted plans for a shopping center, hospital and movie studio on the 160-acre site and bought an initial 66 acres from the federal government in 1999.

Environmental surveys documented extensive contamination. Trichloroethylene was found in high concentrations in soil and groundwater. Exposure to elevated levels of the industrial solvent can cause nerve and organ damage, respiratory problems and impaired immunity.

Hexavalent chromium, used to plate metal and rust-proof aircraft engine parts, was also found in high concentrations in the soil in places. Exposure to hexavalent chromium can cause cold-like symptoms and damage to the nose, throat and lungs. Direct contact with the skin can cause rashes and sores.

In all, the U.S. Department of Labor has identified 259 toxic substances used at the former NASA facility.

After extensive studies, state and federal regulators determined that the contamination could be mitigated to the point that it would not pose a significant risk to workers or the public. A 2001 study, however, cautioned that employees working outdoors for long periods or involved in excavation could be at risk from exposure to volatile organic compounds such as trichloroethylene in the soil.

To bring in revenue, the city began leasing the site for film production as it moved to acquire the remainder of the property from NASA and redevelop it on a fast track.

Officials took advantage of an amendment to the federal Superfund law that allows certain government properties to be sold before they have been cleaned up or while cleanups are still in progress. Such "early transfers" must be approved by the governor of the state.

Then-Gov. Gray Davis granted approval for the Downey property in 2003, and Winston Hickox, then California's secretary of environmental protection, lauded the move as "great for the environment and for the Southland's economy."

The city awarded a \$20.5-million contract to International Risk Assumption, a Denver firm, to conduct a long-term cleanup overseen by the state water board. Work crews extracted trichloroethylene and other contaminants from soil, treated polluted groundwater and removed hundreds of tons of arsenic-laced dirt, among other steps.

Lichter's Industrial Realty Group, which specializes in redeveloping old industrial sites, was selected to convert the aerospace plant into a film production hub. The company took over management of the property in early 2003 and in November of that year bought about 60 acres and leased an additional 20 from the city.

Early on, the makeover ran into difficulty.

Problems arise

In August 2003, a city inspector came upon a pile of dirt excavated from beneath the main studio building, called Building 1, to create an artificial lake for "Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events." (The reservoir served as Lake Lachrymose in the film.) The inspector noticed patches of yellow-green soil in the pile, a possible sign of chromium contamination, according to records of the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The city halted all work at the site and had the soil tested. In some samples, measurements of total chromium -- a combination of hexavalent chromium and trivalent chromium -- were far above the federal safety standard, water board records show. The records say the chromium may have been discharged during the 1950s when a section of the building was used as a plating room.

International Risk Assumption developed a remediation plan in consultation with state regulators. From November 2003 to January 2004, cleanup crews separated the contaminated soil from clean soil and deposited it in a pile to be disposed of later off-site. During this process, an industrial hygienist monitored chromium levels in the air and found that they were safe, according to water board records.

The pile of contaminated soil eventually grew to nearly 7,000 tons.

At the time, the Queen Latifah comedy "Taxi" was being filmed at Downey, including outdoor shooting, and crews for "Lemony Snicket" were creating sets in Building 1.

In February 2004, another film crew arrived to work on "Christmas With the Kranks." The workers noticed the pile of contaminated dirt, which was near a back lot where they would build a replica of a suburban Chicago street.

Ruben Lahn, a laborer on the crew, said supervisors asked him to put a plastic covering over the pile. "They told us there was chromium in the dirt, but it's only bad if it's blowing in the air and we breathe it in," said Lahn, 38. "We joked about it."

David Elliott, construction coordinator for "Christmas With the Kranks," said he met with workers and shared with them test results indicating that the soil was not a health threat.

Though initial tests had detected elevated chromium levels in some samples, later testing by Leymaster Environmental Consulting of Long Beach found concentrations within the federal safety standard, according to Leymaster's report filed with the water board.

The report does not explicitly address why the tests results differed. It does say that as the excavated dirt was sorted and the contaminated soil moved into a separate pile, tainted soil was mixed with clean soil. A water board official said that could explain the lower chromium levels in the later tests.

Still, the remediation plan approved by state officials called for the dirt to be hauled to a landfill in Lancaster. This was done from Feb. 2 to Feb. 10, 2004, according to water board records.

Thomas Messmer, IRG's vice president for construction and project management, initially told The Times that no film production was done at Downey while the chromium-laced pile was there. "There were no production people on the site until after the soil had been removed," he said.

Elliott, however, said his production log showed that the "Christmas With the Kranks" crew started work Feb. 2, 2004, eight days before the cleanup was finished. Production crews for "Taxi" and "Lemony Snicket" had been there earlier.

Asked about this in a subsequent interview, Messmer acknowledged that film workers had been at the site while the contaminated dirt was present. He said he was "working off memory" in the earlier interview and was confused by a reporter's question.

Even so, he said, the soil posed no threat to workers on any of the film productions.

Jeff Hill, a lighting technician on "Taxi," argues otherwise. He was at Downey Studios for several weeks in late 2003.

"No one told us anything," said Hill, 43. "If I had known about the contaminated soil, I never would have stepped foot on that property."

Hill developed lesions on his arms and a growth on his thyroid that was surgically removed, according to his medical records. He was later diagnosed with testicular cancer.

His workers' compensation lawyer referred him to Dr. Marvin Pietruszka, a board-certified specialist in occupational medicine. In a 2008 report included in state files on Hill's case, Pietruszka attributed his cancer and other ailments to exposure to hexavalent chromium, trichloroethylene and other hazardous substances at Downey.

The report noted that chromium had been found in the soil and said that Hill was regularly in contact with soil as he laid cable for outdoor shoots.

"It is interesting to note that only two months prior to working at Downey Studios, Mr. Hill had a comprehensive examination . . . and was given a clean bill of health," Pietruszka wrote.

An independent physician, however, found that Hill's illnesses were not work-related. An insurer denied his workers' compensation claim. Hill appealed, and the two sides have reached a tentative settlement.

Mold, dust cited

By late 2004, film crews were at work inside Building 1, creating futuristic sets for "The Island." The former aerospace hangar was still being renovated, and water leaked through the roof during that winter's torrential rains. Standing water accumulated, and mold was visible on the walls, workers recalled.

"In one of the rooms where we were shooting, there was this disgusting, moldy smell," recalled filmmaker Michael Bay, director of "The Island." "I could just tell there was something in the air."

Dust was also a nuisance. Just outside the building, crews were digging trenches for electrical cables. Elsewhere on the site, grading was underway for a shopping center and a hospital. Clouds of dust blew into the studio building, film workers said.

Steve Basile, a 53-year-old prop maker from Castaic who spent two months working on "The Island," said he has suffered from shortness of breath, peeling skin and other ailments ever since.

"Sometimes I wake up choking in the middle of the night," he said.

Dr. Richard Hyman, a board-certified internist and cardiologist, served as an independent physician in Basile's workers' compensation case. After examining Basile and reviewing his medical records, Hyman concluded in 2008 that working at Downey had aggravated his preexisting ear, nose and throat problems.

Despite the finding, the insurer AIG denied Basile's workers' compensation claim. He is appealing.

In response to workers' complaints, DreamWorks SKG, producer of "The Island," brought in an environmental consulting firm, Mintie Corp., to assess the air quality in Building 1. In a memo to workers, DreamWorks said the tests found mold but at levels that would not affect healthy individuals. (DreamWorks executives declined to comment.)

That was small comfort to Daniel Mustoe, a welder who built sets for "The Island." He complained of flu symptoms that wouldn't go away and of difficulty breathing.

Dr. Bruce Gillis, a medical toxicologist serving as an independent physician in his workers' compensation case, found that Mustoe had been permanently disabled by a fungal infection from mold at Downey.

Gillis said blood tests showed that Mustoe was exposed to the same mold identified by Mintie Corp. in its air-quality tests.

"There is substantial medical evidence that 100% of this permanent disability was caused by" working at Downey, Gillis wrote.

AIG refused to authorize treatment, citing the opinion of another doctor who questioned the validity of the blood tests. Mustoe is appealing.

IRG has responded vigorously to adverse publicity over the workers' claims. In 2005, it filed a libel suit against the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, contending that the union scared away business by falsely claiming in its newsletter that Downey Studios was unsafe.

The union and its insurer paid \$775,000 to settle the case. As a condition of the settlement, the union acknowledged that air-quality tests for mold and asbestos found that Building 1 was a "clean and safe" environment.

Last August, Lichter filed another libel suit, this one against some of the injured workers and activist Vickie Travis, who has publicized their complaints on a website. Travis said the lawsuit, which is awaiting trial, was "an attempt to intimidate me and to suppress our freedom of speech."

Film production continues at Downey Studios, but at a slower pace than before.

IRG executives have said they intend to scale back their film business and have proposed an \$800-million development of shops, offices, restaurants and residential units on the site.

Some of the film workers, meanwhile, remain in limbo, uncertain whether they will ever get disability benefits.

Derek Norrbom, a welder who worked on "The Island," still suffers shortness of breath, headaches, a cough and persistent fatigue.

An independent physician found that Norrbom, 24, "experienced an occupational upper respiratory injury" as a "direct result" of working at Downey.

Two insurers recently paid \$35,000 to settle the case, Norrbom's family said.

Norrbom's father, Bruce, 58, a film production foreman, takes five medications a day for nerve damage, joint pain, itching and rashes. Doctors disagreed on whether his symptoms were linked to Downey, and AIG rejected his workers' compensation claim. He has appealed.

Bruce's wife, Tammy, said her once-hard-driving husband, who supervised crews of 30 people on such productions as "Independence Day" and "Alien Resurrection," can barely muster the energy to leave their home in Castaic.

"I just want my family back the way it was before," she said.

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Former Times researcher Janet Lundblad contributed to this report.

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