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Board tested dump yard air for toxins just three times since 2011

CHENNAI: Despite garbage frequently catching fire or being set ablaze at the Kodungaiyur and Perungudi dump yards and repeated complaints from residents of localities nearby about smoke and health problems, the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) has collected air samples from the sites to test for toxins only thrice since 2011.

Data obtained by TOI through an RTI application has found that the board tested air at Kodungaiyur just once, in 2011-12, when it collected six samples. It tested the air in Perungudi on two occasions, collecting four samples in 2012-13 and two in 2013-14.

Of the six samples from Kodungaiyur, three contained respirable suspended particulate matter (RSPM) well in excess of the maximum permissible limit of 100 ug/m³ (micrograms per cubic meter of air).

In Perungudi, the board found two of the four air samples collected in 2012-13 and one of the two collected in 2013-14

had higher than permissible RSPM levels.

Research has shown that exposure to air with an RSPM levels in excess of 100ug/m³ causes a wide range of health problems, including respiratory illnesses and cancer.

The corporation and private sanitation company Ramky Enviro unload more than 4,500 tonnes of garbage into the Kodungaiyur and Perungudi dump yards every day and ragpickers often set fire to garbage to collect metal. But Corporation of Chennai's public health department has not conducted a single check on residents of localities surrounding the dump yards for possible problems as a result of air pollution. The residents say many families suffer from respiratory disorders.

Tests by Community Environmental Management and Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives in 2012 showed that air around the Kodungaiyur yard contained at least 19 toxic chemicals and carcinogens.

A TNPCB official said the board does not have the equipment to monitor air pollution. "We plan to install ambient air quality monitors in these areas as soon as possible," he said.

Environmentalist Nityanand Jayaraman says the Swachh Bharat campaign is a good initiative but officials remain removed from ground realities such as the fallout of dumping garbage in open sites within the city. "People in areas near the dump yards are fed up with air and water pollution. The

corporation should shut down the dump yards," she said.