

Protesters march on alleged polluter

S.D. firm accused of Tijuana abuses

By H.G. Meyer

The San Diego parent company of a former Mexico waste processor was visited by about 75 protesters yesterday, who demanded the company clean up the toxic mess they say is poisoning a working-class neighborhood in Tijuana.

Carrying placards depicting heaps of toxic waste, the demonstrators sought to keep a spotlight on what many environmentalists describe as one of the worst toxic waste sites in the Tijuana border region. They blame the situation on free trade.

They marched two blocks from a rented hall in Point Loma to the small office of the New Frontier Trading Corp., which until 1994 operated a battery-smelting plant in Tijuana's Mesa de Otay industrial area.

"José Kahn: You Forgot Something in Tijuana," read one of the placards. Kahn, who

heads New Frontier, had no comment.

The protest was organized by the San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition.

Kahn's company operated a lead smelting plant for 22 years in Tijuana under the name Metales y Derivados SA. For its final 14 years, the plant was located near the neighborhood of Colonia Chilpancingo just south of the border.

In 1994, the Mexican government closed the plant for violating national environmental rules. But when Metales y Derivados moved out, it left behind some 6,600 tons of hazardous waste, said Carlos Padilla, a manager with PROFEPA, Mexico's environmental agency.

Since then, streams of lead and battery acid have spilled downhill to Colonia Chilpancingo, about 30 of whose residents marched in the protest yesterday.

Andrea Pedro Aguilar, a colonia resident for 18 years, attributed her children's rashes and nosebleeds to overflow from the waste site.

"I just ask you to please clean

up Metales y Derivados," she said. "It's not just my family that's suffering in that area."

The Environmental Health Coalition hopes to force the hand of international agencies and the Mexican government to clean up the Tijuana site.

In 1998, the coalition petitioned the Commission for Environmental Cooperation to take a stand on whether the Mexican government has enforced its environmental laws by allowing the hazardous site to languish. Formed as an environmental agency under the North American Free Trade Agreement, the commission can't override member nations but may carry moral weight.

Commission spokesman Charles Dickson said the agency will issue findings on the case no later than this fall. Members Canada, Mexico and the United States then must validate the findings.

In addition, an Environmental Health Coalition attorney César Luna said he intends to persuade the Mexican government to seek an extradition order against Kahn, a measure

normally used against murder and drug trafficking suspects, not suspected polluters.

Mexico's initial response to the coalition's 1998 petition — unsealed this month after a commission meeting in Guadalajara — drove home that difference. Mexico said criminal and environmental law are not the same.

"That doesn't mean it cannot happen," Luna said. "Ironically, they feel it's more important to extradite people who have trafficked in drugs, but we feel that it's equally dangerous to society when you leave 6,000 tons behind and run away."

Yesterday's protesters also cited Colonia Chilpancingo as an example of the failings of recent trade agreements.

"Every time you visit the site, you step into a community that has been violated by an international agreement," protester Xiomara Castro said.

H.G. Meyer is a Union-Tribune intern. Staff writers Anna Cearley and Leonel Sanchez contributed to this report.