Message from DTSC Director Debbie Raphael
Hazardous Waste Tracking is a system with many layers

California's system for tracking hazardous waste relies on paper manifests in a digital world. While our Department and the federal government work on improvements, I want Californians to know how we are keeping communities safe now.

We have been aware that a small fraction of waste shipments are not captured by the tracking system, and that concerns me. Our system should account for *every* shipment of waste in California.

If this system was the only tool we had to ensure Californians are safe from hazardous waste, I would not sleep well at night. However, it is only one layer in an overlapping effort to keep us safe.

The first layer consists of local, state and federal inspectors who conduct more than 100,000 inspections of hazardous waste generators each year. Not only do these inspectors spot potential on-site problems, they inspect generators' paperwork for shipments of hazardous waste.

A second layer consists of checks at landfills and treatment facilities. Each of these companies has a load-checking program to ensure they are not receiving hazardous waste that they are not qualified to accept. Municipal waste programs also have inspections and monitoring to ensure that hazardous waste is not being illegally dumped or poured down drains. These agencies tip us off when they suspect waste is not being managed properly.

The third layer of protection consists of the people who live and work in California using our reporting systems when they see suspicious activity. Each year we receive hundreds of tips online, by phone or in person, tips that local, state or federal enforcers can follow up on. An anonymous tip of this sort recently led to the nation's second largest fine ever levied for hazardous waste violations.

In Imperial, Fresno and Kern counties, we participate in unique, resident-driven electronic community reporting systems that track suspicious activity in real time. This has led to real successes, and we see them as potential models for use elsewhere.

The tracking system is the fourth layer, and it is admittedly a slow indicator of wrongdoing. In fact, waste documents rarely are the first warning that there may be a problem; they're best used as supporting evidence when we take enforcement action against unscrupulous waste generators or haulers.

Yet, what this system does tell us is that 99 percent of the 450,000 annual shipments in California arrive safely at their prescribed destination. In the majority of instances where loads of waste cannot be tracked, it is paperwork that is missing, not waste. As I indicated above, even a 99-percent success record is not enough; we must strive to track every shipment.

I discovered the drawbacks of the tracking system the first week I became director in May 2011. Waste going to an unpermitted treatment facility in the desert community of Mecca had been manifested, but no warning bells were sounded, and I learned that no one in the department regularly reviewed the data.

That changed immediately. Now we have a staff member who on a daily basis reviews manifest data for irregularities, and our programs are required to ensure that wastes removed from cleanup projects are sent to appropriately permitted facilities.

California and the rest of the country are saddled with a paper system for tracking hazardous waste – a relic of another age that we anticipate will be replaced by a nationwide electronic system in the coming years. I fully support this shift. A nationwide electronic tracking system will alert us to irregularities quickly, and enable us to use our resources on cracking down on violators.

It has been clear to me for some time that our hazardous waste tracking system must be improved. In addition to the improvements we have made since the start of this administration, my department is working to secure resources needed to improve and analyze the hazardous waste data, help us close the loop on missing records and take enforcement action when warranted. During the past 18 months, we have completed a state-mandated feasibility report, which is a key step in securing an upgrade to the hazardous waste tracking system.

We've come a long way in California. Our lawmakers have had the vision and will to create a management system that surpasses all other states in scope. Multiple levels of oversight allow us to maximize our resources and pool our expertise, so that when a weakness in that system occurs the foundation is still effective. I am committed to modernizing outdated components such as the manifest tracking system, so that the foundation will be even stronger in years to come.