Equipment to control toxic chemicals inside a Tampa factory didn’t work right, creating more risks for workers. As violations mounted, regulators stayed away.

**PART 2: THE FAILINGS**

OSHA gave Gopher ample warning before site visits, which meant the company had time to deep-clean a factory coated with lead. The agency sent inspectors who missed evidence of dangerous levels of lead in the air, or who made other critical errors, including testing for the wrong chemical after workers complained about high gas exposure.

That was before OSHA stopped inspecting Gopher at all. The agency hasn’t been inside the factory in five years.

U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, called the absence of regulators at the plant “a total failure — total abdication of their responsibility.”

Donald Gopher’s smokestacks extract lead from about 50,000 old car batteries a day and melt it to create new blocks of the metal. The plant is one of only 10 in the United States.

Since OSHA last appeared, Gopher repeatedly put workers at risk, internal documents show.

Lead fumes worsened in the area of the factory where the metal is turned to liquid. By 2019, nearly half of air lead readings in the furnace department were higher than the protection capability of the respirators assigned to most workers.

The company let lead dust pile up and detected life-threatening levels of sulfur dioxide at least three times in different parts of the plant.

An employee passed out after inhaling chemicals where wastewater is treated. A maintenance worker was exposed to lead in the air 15 times higher than what his respirator could handle.

During or after Gopher employees worked around air-lead levels that were hundreds of times above the federal limit. At one point, the concentration was more than 40 times over.

“I would call those levels outrageous,” said Dr. Philip Landrigan, an expert in lead exposure and director of the Global Observatory on Pollution and Health at Boston College.

“This just calls out for an OSHA inspection,” he said. “Big time.”

The Times examined thousands of pages of company and regulatory records that detail unsafe conditions at the factory and how OSHA has responded. Reporters interviewed doctors, occupational health specialists and more than 80 current and former workers, many of whom shared testing results, videos and photos taken inside the plant as recently as this year.

The first installment of the Times’ investigation, published last week, showed that most Gopher workers have had enough lead in their blood to put them at risk of a host of health problems, including high blood pressure, kidney problems and cardiovascular disease.

See **POISONED, 2W**
Today's installment illustrates why problems have spilled the last decade. The company and regulators have been under investigation for toxic conditions. Globe did not agree to interview requests for this story. The company also declined to answer specific written questions about employee exposures.

In a memo to the Times, Chief Operating Officer Eric Robinson said Globe is dedicated to safety and that average worker blood-lead levels in Tampa are below the standards set by the "recognized authority for employee blood lead levels on our industry". The blood-lead levels of Globe workers have been under the MSHA for determining whether employees must be removed as a safety precaution. But doctor, industrial hygienists and labor officials agree the level is way too high. Newer workers in the 1970s is so high, it does more to protect companies than workers.

"Globe needs to ban lead and there's no safe level to protect," said John Fish, who wrote the lead standard for the agency in 1979.

Globe, based in the University of California, Los Angeles, opened its first workshop in 1978, when it was implemented four decades ago. The company was designed to protect American lead workers who had levels of the neurotoxin in their blood high enough to cause harm but below the threshold requiring their removal from the agency's data.

Blood-lead levels 25 micrograms per deciliter and higher have been linked to end-stage kidney and nervous systems must be handled by inspection, according to the special enforcement program established in 2010.

The director did not translate at the Tampa OSHA office, roughly 3 miles from the lead emitter.

More than 400 blood tests of workers at Globe were at least that high from 2016 to 2020 alone, according to data obtained by the Times.

Not one prompted an inspection.

PROBLEMS PERSECT

When Minnesota-based Globoro bought the Tampa plant in 2004, the company had plans to transform it into an open-air sewer into an enclosed, state-of-the-art operation. A factory, which encompassed the existing one, would ease the plant's production capacity from 50,000 tons a year to 120,000, an increase worth hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue.

Before construction began in 2010, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had utility to lead emission-restraining, lower levels in the building's air. The company also had lead levels in the employees' air.

Globe's efforts to keep lead from leaving the new plant made contamination worse inside. Air levels in the building was also dense in the form of dust, which is a byproduct of the lead才船 that it can escape into the neighborhood.

The baghouse is a three-story structure where the air from the factory gathered and when dust is removed and then directed into the air. The baghouse was installed, sold components began to fail. It was then that the company was notified and leaving gaps holes.

The plant's lead came from the smelters. A control. The control system had been used by the company to remove dust.

Lead dust and fumes have been known to contaminate the plant's air and work areas.

When corrosion disabled a critical baghouse feature, workers entered small rooms to manually shake bags full of lead-containing dust.

Toby Kehoe Jr, now lives in the same factory, the former Marine passed out while working for Globe at Resources in 2013. On the cover, a photo of him was built into a mosaic by designer Susan Krystoff-Jones using dozens of images taken for this project.

Dangers loom inside a Tampa factory

Workers have faced dangers inside Tampa-based Globoro Resource, recycling plant, the only operating lead mill in Florida (right). Graphic by SCOTT BROWN (Special to the Times)

PROBLEMS INSIDE THE PLANT

Lead dust gets vented from the plant to a place called the baghouse. The plant was on a ventilation system to keep workers safe. But problems with the system have resulted in high levels of exposure, including lead, cadmium and sulfur dioxide gas.

Breakdowns forced workers into a critical baghouse feature, the workers entered small rooms to manually shake bags full of lead-containing dust.

Note: Sotpik is a compliant depletion, not to scale.

Graphic by SCOTT BROWN (Special to the Times)

Key facts about OSHA

- What was the agency created for? Industry created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 1970 in response to public outcry over preventable workplace injuries and deaths.

- What is the agency's enforcement powers? OSHA typically performs spot inspections or requires when workers initiate a complaint. Its fines are set federal standards. From 2011 to 2013, OSHA fined $306,930 for serious violations. OSHA can issue fines of $73,132 per violation if the situation is deemed willful or a repeat problem.

- How many people does OSHA employ and how many businesses does it oversee?

About 2,000 OSHA workers regulate more than 7 million businesses nationwide. OSHA's leaders say the agency is understaffed and understaffed, which is statistically highest that it would take 10 years to inspect every workplace in a state.

- Do other agencies also enforce workplace safety?

Half of states supplemented the federal agency with their own occupational safety and health programs. Some states have federal regulations to conduct workplace inspections and an independent agency. Federal agencies are regulated by state and federal officials at the state agency operating across the country. The lead in OSHA is a lead from continuing one in remaining name.

- What rules can OSHA enforce at places like the Globe Resources?

Globe is subject to many OSHA rules, including those related to lead, cadmium, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, asbestos and respiratory protection.

- What are the thresholds OSHA has for removing a worker?

The agency's rules require that workers be removed from exposure if their blood lead levels surpass 75 micrograms per deciliter. Medical research has demonstrated an array of health effects from the toxic metal at much lower concentrations, including cognitive, heart and kidney problems.

- How does lead medical testing work?

Workers must be tested at least every 12 months.

- What is the lead threshold of concern?

What is the lead threshold of concern that could lead to health problems? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define an elevated blood lead level as 5 micrograms per deciliter. At 10 times that amount, for year's, researchers at professional groups like the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, has largely ignored the permissibility of the low levels, as well as the requirements, even though the OSHA rules have proven not to be useful to workers health.

- Has the agency tried to update its rules?

Revising the medical removal threshold of the lead standard has been on OSHA's agenda since 2007. On average, it takes the agency more than seven years to issue standards.
jerk and shake the poison-laden bags by hand, at least twice per shift. Workers, like Trevor Craig, prop open the entrance to air out the space, their respirators fogging up from the rush of heat. They used monitors to measure gases before entering some of the cells. If the machine kept the levels too high:

"That little meter thing will be going off, screaming," said Craig, who worked in the baghouse from 2013 to 2017. When it stopped beeping, workers stepped inside. Sometimes, when dust overflowed from the bags, the cells left the machines looking like ghosts.

Sustained exposure to bags can have severe long-term ramifications for the workers and their families. And when chemical levels spike, they can pose immediate threats. Three former baghouse workers described passing out, overwhelmed by heat and fumes, during their shifts. Fire described having episodes where they couldn’t catch their breath and their hearts raced or heat out of rhythm. As the malfunctions persisted, the need for shaking the bags became so dire, Gopher hired contractors to help. Jacob Clements found himself at the factory in 2014 assigned to the task. He was 19.

Around 11:20 p.m. on Feb. 28, he and others were working and had just finished shaking the bags when Clements felt a water break. Sudden heat struck him, and he held back vomit. He roiled his head to relax, then passed out. He slammed onto the shoulder of a co-worker who had to rescue him. Someone called 911 and reported he’d been unconscious.

Clements fainted in and out remembered hearing footsteps, a stern, someone saying, "Put him on his back, let his head here, till him up." He awoke in an ambulance rushing him to the hospital. Doctors believed Clements had been exposed to sulfar dioxide and possibly other gases, according to medical records. They sent him home with a prescription for an inhaler to help with shortness of breath and wheezing.

The shift was Clements’ last.

"I’m not coming back here," Clements recalled thinking. "No More!"

About an hour after Clements headed to the hospital, some of the baghouse rooms caught fire. In an email to environmental regulators, Gopher said the fire was caused when gases were sucked into the wrong ventilation system and routed to the wrong baghouse cells. More than 250 pounds of lead spread into the neighborhood, the company estimated. Gopher made improvements to the baghouse, including replacing corroded components with stainless steel. The upgrades were completed in 2010 and meant workers no longer had to routinely shake bags loaded with lead, according to interviews and documents. Other environmental breakdowns, how- ever, forced workers to do dirty tasks in different rooms of the baghouse.

The dust that fell into hoppers after the bags shook was supposed to be pushed by machinery into a pipe, then blended in a tank with water until it looked like molasses milk.

But the dust jammed along the way.

Workers described unclenching it using pick Axles, lifting hoppers that fell to the ground then shoveling it into con- 

"It would just rain in your face. It was something to see.”

John Caste, former Gopher Resource worker

Recapping the investigative findings

Tampa Bay Times journalists spent 10 months investigat- ing what happens at Florida’s lone lead factory, owned by Gopher Resource. These findings:

- Gopher exposed workers for years to air levels of lead hundreds of times Higher than the federal limit.
- Eight out of 10 workers from 2016 to 2018 had lead in their blood to put them at risk of increased blood pressure, kidney dysfunction or cardiovascular disease.
- Gopher knew its factory had too much lead dust, but
- the company disabled ventilation features that cap- tured fumes and moved slowly to fix faulty mechanical systems. Workers were left vulnerable, leaving regu- lators that couldn’t protect them when poison levels spiked.
- Federal rules required that Gopher provide regular (checkups, but the company contracted doctors didn’t tell workers their blood-lead levels put them in danger.
- Gopher rewarded workers who could keep that blood-lead levels down and punished those who couldn’t.
- Dust from the plant has been the suspected cause of lead exposure at in at least 12 children — the sons and daughters of employees who unknowingly carried the poison home.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration hasn’t inspected the factory for lead-related issues since 1984 and has missed problems in previous visits.

Read Part 1: The Factory tampabay.com/poisoned

Still a totem at the time, Jacob Clements worked as a contractor at Gopher Resource assigned to shake the bags in the baghouse. After Feb. 28, 2014, he never went back.
to regulators would jeopardize those jobs. You mentioned the name OSHA around there, or you’re contacting them,” said Wolcott, a former laborer, “but you might as well go to jail.”

Gopher did not answer specific questions sent to the company about what it told workers about exposure levels, or about the protection equipment it uses, or about how it reacted when employees raised safety issues with management or with OSHA.

ERRORS ADD UP

While OSHA inspectors walked through Gopher’s doors, they made mistakes that cost them at every single glaze drop to day one real conditions at the factory.

Instead of conducting surprise visits, inspectors on multiple occasions took longer or never showed up at all, according to the company. When they did arrive, employees described seeing cotton dust lying on the resting place of the plant floor, passing through the route to guide inspectors through the factory, and going elsewhere after it. OSHA investigators did not check whether or not supervisors talked to inspectors.

The company discharged or laid off five for five years in the background, furnace and water treatment areas. To see how the regulators work, inspectors who were supposed to help clean the harbor breaking officials from the acid-eroded floor was described.

Both said supervisors made it clear the closing was the same thing about OSHA use.

They knew they why they was because they could shut down,” Russo said. “They’d shut down for a week, and we all won’t have jobs. So if you tell us that, of course, we’re all motivated. We all need to work — every one of us had a family to take care of,” Russo said. Inspectors typically don’t warn companies they are coming unless their need to arrange logistics for chemical or tasting follow-up meetings, which are done on the occasion at Gopher. It happened after the workers were informed to the agency about sulfur dioxide gas.

The plant, cotton dust is released during multiple production steps, including when lead is milled in the exerciser. The gas stream flows into ducts and through multiple filtering systems, designed to reduce emissions before they travel out of the plant’s 130-foot stacks.

In poorly ventilated areas, according to federal health officials sulfur dioxide exposure can result inasperations, coughing, burning and irritation of the eyes, nose, throat, difficulty with air as well as upper respiratory problems.

On March 14, 140 tissues came to the factory. Two workers were booked up to monitor tissues to gather samples.

One of them was Rich Barsky, who was well aware of the sulfur dioxide problem, worked in the plant and tested to his throat to close. A pitiful red spread across his skin, leaving a sensation of pins and needles.

Barsky said the gas was so over- whelming, it sucked dust into a computer room, where workers had to aim a fan to the door. A series of financial problems had allowed the gas to build up at different places over months.

But when Tove arrived, Barsky, said a plant supervisor told him they were going to measure a different chemical, a more common gas from Gopher.

“You’re worried about this?” he commented referring to a co-worker. “They need to be worried about the —” (sulfur dioxide) that’s going out, he said.

Source: OSHA, internal records, Times


gopher at a glance

Exagon, Michigan, Health

1990 History: Gopher operates two lead battery recycling factories in the country, one in Minnesota and one in Tampa. Brought the lead Tampa factory in 2005: Gopher is classified as a secondary lead because it recycles lead. It is the only company in Florida producing energy in Florida.

What does it do: The Tampa operation recycles about 50,000 car batteries a day, extracting the lead, melting it, purifying it and forging it into new blocks that have been sold to automotive suppliers, truck makers and the U.S. military.

Employees: About 350 in the two locations, with more than 350 in Tampa.

Revenue: A private company, has never disclosed its revenues, but it is more than a quarter of a million.


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Health risks of lead in the blood

Lead is a neurotoxin. Stabilized exposure over time can have serious health impacts. These are just a few of the health risks that have been documented that fall well below the OSHA level to remove a worker who has been exposed.

Consultants hired by Gopher in 2017 determined that air-leads exceeded the protection capability of respirators commonly in use. The consultants identified violations that OSHA missed because respirators hadn’t been there in a year.

Barfield, who left the factory in 2013, and he didn’t want to speak to the inspector because he needed his job. OSHA may have focused on silicosis and lead toxicity, but Barfield had a clear memory of the production process at Gopher workers.

Three industrial hygienists said if workers were complaining about silicosis, it didn’t make sense for the inspector to test for lead.

"That was not the right choice," said Rachel Jones, an industrial hygienist professor at the University of Washington. "You wouldn’t measure one, when you know the other is there to find the other...

Troye, who still works at OSHA, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

In an April 9, 2012 letter, she wrote to the worker who had complained: "No levels of silicosis were detected. No citations were issued.

The inspector sampled the wrong chemical, then closed the case.

A year later, Teddy Ebanke Jr, the former Marine, collapsed and died from the exposed case.

Months after Ebanke, the contracted baghouse worker, passed out. Silicosis was suspected.

When OSHA returned in December 2012 to investigate lead exposure after a complaint, the agency made more critical mistakes.

OSHA inspector Olga Correa visited the factory with the company’s safety officers and viewed a year’s worth of air-monitoring data, notes show.

At the time, tests indicated the company regularly had lead readings dozens and hundreds of times above the federal limit. In the factory that year, more than a third of the readings were too high for the respirator assigned to meet workers.

Just months earlier, in June 2014, the amount of lead in the air reached life-threatening levels in the baghouse. A heavy metal linked to long and prostate cancer; was recorded hundreds of times above the federal limit.

Correa’s report was so sparse, it’s unclear whether she toured the baghouse during her walk-through, and OSHA would not say which hours she did.

The inspector’s own report only says that she “observed the battery recycling process.”

Correa gave Gopher one week before she returned to conduct her own air monitoring.

When Correa came back, she attached small monitoring devices to the uniforms of at least three employees. The workers were selected by company managers, according to an employee with direct knowledge of the visit. One handpicked worker was supposed to represent the conditions inside Gopher’s battery-breaking-and-repairing rooms, where conditions were safer.

OSHA inspectors are supposed to test workers who have the highest exposures. The amounts Correa measured weren’t close to what Gopher had logged in its own records.

Federal rules allow workers to be exposed to 50 micrograms of lead per cubic meter of air averaged over an eight-hour shift. The highest air-leads level Correa recorded during the federal inspection was 750 micrograms per cubic meter in the furnace area. That was above the federal limit, but 10 days before, the plant’s internal data showed readings nearly 20 times higher.

Correa did not assess the plant’s ventilation system, according to records. The inspector and her superiors decided not to investigate citations, noting in her report that they were trying to control lead exposure.

Correa told the Times she could not remember details about her Gopher visit, saying she had done hundreds of inspections for the agency.

Hours before OSHA closed the case, on March 4, 2015, company data showed the amount of lead in the plant’s baghouse swirled past life-threatening levels. The concentration was measured at more than 200,000 micrograms per cubic meter.

Regulators haven’t measured lead at the factory again. They cited the company in 2015 for an amputation injury, after a worker’s fin-
gurt was crushed. They conducted a fall-back safety inspection that same year and issued no fine.

In May 2016, a worker filed another complaint to OSHA about silicosis disease levels. The said workers were suffering from headaches and that the control to control silicosis emissions had been shut down for repairs. The plant was running and producing lead, says the complaint.

The employee didn’t specify where the high exposures were happening but said the silicosis small was strong outside, from 200 feet away.

The next month, OSHA inspector Linette Pramuka-Pulida visited the plant to perform an inspection. But she lim-
ited her testing to outdoor, writing that a smokestack was the only possible source of emissions.

Elevated sulfur dioxide levels had occurred inside the factory in the baghouse and water treatment area, accord-
ing to interviews and company documents.

Pramuka-Pulida dumped them both. The sulfur dioxide levels in the outside air were below the federal limit, in the outside air.

Pramuka-Pulida declined to answer ques-
tions when a reporter showed up at her door.

That was the last worker complaint.

LEAD, 8W

We want to talk with you

Do you live in the neighborhoods of Grand Park, Oak Park, Florence Village, Chile Farm or Uncle Gardner’s Hillborough County?

And do you suffer from these health issues?

Kidney disease

Infertility

Hypertension

Muscle weakness

Behavioral problems

Reduced attention span

disability

headaches

These are among the factors associated with high levels of lead exposure. Please contact us if you are interested in talking.

Cory E. Johnson

cjjohnson@ tampabay.com

985-612-9346

Rebecca Wasington

rebecca.wasington@ tampabay.com

985-658-7047

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Projects Big Picture are important and expensive. More than 25 journalists participated in our recent reporting initiative at the Tampa Bay Times over the past two years. We have spent more than $500,000 when you factor in salaries, travel and other reporting costs for everyone involved.

You can support investigative reporting by contributing to our Tampa Bay Times Investigative Fund.

We have established a goal of raising enough money from the community to support our watchdog reporting team in our mission. The goal would cover salaries and benefits for one full-time and four reporters, as well as health benefits, legal expenses, travel and reporting costs. That amounts to about $500,000 a year. Our goal to start the new year, is $1 million—or $1 million—to sustain our investigative reporting operation through 2023.

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For more information, contact Amica Kosier, development and communications relations director, at akosier@ tampabay.com (727-895-2284).

Ricky Barfield dealt with the effects of sulfur dioxide exposure in 2012 while working at Gopher. So it surprised him when an OSHA inspector instead wanted to test for sulfuric acid, the wrong chemical.
5. Gopher has made several alterations to the Hygiene dust collection systems since they were installed in 2009 (see bullet items below). The alterations have made the exhaust hoods less effective and have degraded the airflow balance through the ductwork.

- The exhaust hood over the Blast Furnace loading tap station has been removed.
- The exhaust hoods for the Ladlers at the Refrigerative Furnace were removed.

Consultants told Gopher in 2017 that the factory had made the ventilation system less efficient and less effective by disconnecting vent hoods. OSHA didn’t inspect the factory that year.

And Egis had a blast-level load exceeded 30 micrograms per deciliter while working at Gopher Resources. His hands should have triggered an OSHA inspection. But that never happened.

A ventilation pipe is partially clogged by dust in 2025. Workers say this kind of obstruction can impede the system, and the pipes have rarely been cleaned.

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