



Informal vs formal enforcement in ECHO: what to check first

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On Oct. 5, 2026, EPA's ECHO database listed 40,770 active facilities with a warning in the past year, and only 9,800 with a formal action. Of the warned-only group, 3,649 already carry a serious-violation flag.

The Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, keeps public records about places that hold pollution permits. The website is called ECHO. It is short for Enforcement and Compliance History Online. Anyone can look up a plant or shop for free at echo.epa.gov.

Two words show up again and again on those records: informal and formal. They sound alike. They are not the same signal.

An informal action is a warning. Think of a notice of violation or a warning letter. It usually has no fine and no court case. A formal action is stronger. It can be an order, a signed agreement, or a court case. It often comes with a fine.

On Monday, October 5, 2026, EPA's public ECHO web services listed 40,770 active facilities nationwide that got an informal action in the past year. Only 9,800 got a formal action in that same window. Warnings were about four times as common as formal punishments.

Most warnings have not turned into formal action. About 33,552 facilities got a warning in the past year and had no formal action in five years. Of those warned-only facilities, 3,649 already carry a serious-violation flag. That flag is called SNC for water and waste, or HPV for air. Those are the places to watch first.

In Oregon, 152 facilities got a warning and no formal action in five years. Thirty-three of them carry that serious flag. Oregon's ratio is closer than the nationwide picture—about two warnings for every formal action—but the same check order still helps.

A simple order for what to check first: start with a serious flag plus a recent formal action; then a serious flag plus a warning with no formal action yet; then a warning with no serious flag; then older formal actions that may already be closed. Open the facility's Detailed Facility Report before you treat any row as a new problem.

ECHO can lag. A new action may take from about a week to three months to show up. A count is not a list of confirmed violations. This page names no plant and no street. County and city are as far as a later note should go.

The longer note, with the full tables, is on SNCAAlert:

<https://sncaalert.com/blog/informal-vs-formal-enforcement-echo-bd-priority>

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What the serious flag means

SNC means Significant Noncompliance. EPA uses it for the most serious or long-lasting problems under water, hazardous-waste, and drinking-water rules. HPV means High Priority Violation. It is the air version of the same idea under the Clean Air Act. ECHO groups both as significant violators.

Informal does not mean “not serious.” A warning can come right before a formal order. That is why the warned-only group with a serious flag matters. Formal does not mean “guilty.” Many formal actions end in a settlement.

Penalty dollars in ECHO summaries are a hint, not a headline. One large case can make a group total look huge. A penalty is not the full cost to the owner. It does not include repair work, testing, or legal fees.

How the numbers were pulled

All counts come from EPA's public ECHO web service, queried October 5, 2026. The searches kept only active facilities. Formal and informal windows used ECHO's time filters. “Now flagged SNC/HPV” is ECHO's significant-violator count. If you run the same search on a later day, your numbers may be a little different.

This is a plain-language note. It is not legal advice and not EPA guidance. SNCAAlert is not EPA and is not endorsed by EPA. Always confirm on the facility's own Detailed Facility Report before you reach out.

Notes

- Source: EPA ECHO web services, pulled Oct. 5, 2026. Nationwide active facilities: 40,770 informal in past year; 9,800 formal in past year; 3,649 informal-only (no formal in 5 years) already flagged SNC/HPV. Oregon: 152 informal with no formal in 5 years, 33 flagged.
- SNCAAlert: <https://sncaalert.com/blog/informal-vs-formal-enforcement-echo-bd-priority>
- Author: Ryan Standley / Record of Sale, LLC / Notice Nearby. Not legal advice. Not EPA guidance. Not a newspaper. Not Legal Publication. No street addresses.

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