

'INDUSTRIES ARE LITERALLY NEIGHBORS TO KIDS WITH ASTHMA'

— ALISON GUZMAN

Joanne Gross is not the only resident of Eugene's industrial corridor with concerns. West Eugene residents at a community forum in 2010 asked if something was "horribly wrong" because they were experiencing pollution "viscerally," and they told stories of smokestacks that "stink" and "rain on you." They told of people with respiratory problems and a lack of access to health care. Some of the Latino residents in the community had concerns that went unheard because they lacked the language and access to voice them.

Beyond Toxics joined forces with Centro LatinoAmericano to look into the health effects of industrial pollutants on west Eugene communities and the people and children who live there. According to their research, a school child in west Eugene breathes in approximately 72 pounds of air toxics a year. The 97402 zip code that makes up west Eugene is home to 99 percent of Eugene's air toxics, and the area has a higher percentage of minority residents. Centro and Beyond Toxics' research shows that the west Eugene area is 13 percent Latino, much higher than Eugene's average population of 7.8 percent Latino. The west Eugene industrial corridor also has about 26 to 28 percent of residents below poverty level. These are the factors, Lisa Arkin of Beyond Toxics says, that make west Eugene an environmental justice community.

Alison Guzman was hired by Beyond Toxics and Centro LatinoAmericano to do outreach among Latino and low-income populations in west Eugene. One resident, who preferred to be referred to by her first name, Josefina, told Guzman that she had lived near the J.H. Baxter plant for five years and often noticed odors that give her headaches. Her children have congestion and have developed respiratory allergies, Josefina said. She told Guzman, "Please help us because honestly this worries me very much, for the health of my children and the health of the adults as well. Sometimes I don't even want to go out on walks, or I don't even know if I should go out or not because the odor is terrible."

When an industry emits air pollution, the question is not whether it can pollute, but how much it can pollute under its permits. The data that Beyond Toxics pulled together comes from the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory (TRI), LRAPA and the Eugene Toxics Right-to-Know database. Arkin says the approach was innovative in that it took into account not just national, but local sources including the air permits from LRAPA.

Lane County's air issues aren't only in west Eugene. Merlyn Hough of LRAPA says though he's unsure of the



ALISON GUZMAN

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

minority population, he would call Oakridge an environmental justice community because of its low-income residents and poor air quality. LRAPA has worked to change the air quality there through a grant that allows residents to replace older wood-burning stoves with cleaner-burning ones that release less particulate matter and through curtailing wood burning on bad air days.

Hough says LRAPA deals with air quality through industry permitting and implementing air toxics regulation on various industry sources, air monitoring and through working to control "regional risk drivers": benzene from gas, diesel particulates and PAHs — polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. PAHs are linked to cancer and liver damage among other health issues. Hough says PAHs are largely caused by wood burning stoves.

Arkin points out that on bad air days in the winter, when inversions trap air in the valley, residents are told not to burn their wood stoves, which are sometimes their only

sources of heat, but toxic-emitting factories, such as the Seneca Sustainable Energy wood-burning plant, can continue to burn and emit particulate matter. Hough says the EPA has never allowed "intermittent control" and that standards have to be met all the time. Those standards have tightened over the years. Hough says where in the past an industry might have controlled 50 percent of its emissions, now it might control 90 percent.

Guzman says, "Because businesses have the same rights as humans, they should be as accountable as individuals. When LRAPA gives a warning that we can't burn, the company should also have to stop burning."

She points out that in west Eugene, "industries are literally neighbors to kids with asthma" and the area has families that are "low income, vulnerable, not as likely to have health insurance." Mapping done by Beyond Toxics shows schools, parks and homes that are less than a mile from the smokestacks that are puffing chemicals into Eugene's air. Fairfield Elementary is .6 miles away from the J.H. Baxter plant and the nearest home is 100 feet. The J.H. Baxter plant released 36,000 pounds of "fugitive ammonia" and 943 pounds of creosote in 2010, according to the TRI.

Arkin says Beyond Toxics has gotten phone calls from Bethel teachers and parents who say the bad air on some days has led to kids feeling like they could not breathe during recess time. The goal, Arkin says, in the environmental justice mapping is not to pick on Bethel schools, but rather that schools "should be equally healthy and we don't think they are."

Guzman says that in areas like west Eugene, residents can feel disempowered. They get told if they don't like the air quality they can move somewhere else, but most can't afford to. And many residents see the industries such as wood products plants as part of their culture. It's where they or their neighbors work.

That's where environmental justice comes in, Guzman says, and grassroots organizations like Beyond Toxics that put pressure on industries and elected officials to regulate them.

Joanne Gross says, "If you don't live in Bethel, you don't come here for anything," and so most Eugeneans don't see the industries and the neighborhoods near them. But, as she watches her sons run over to the neighbor's yard to look for kittens, she says, "It's a wonderful neighborhood where kids can play in the street and with a lot of young families and a lot of young kids." Down the street, the smokestacks quietly puff into the sky over Eugene. **EW**

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