

Still toxic after all these years

By Manuel Pastor, Rachel Morello-Frosch, James Sadd

The Bay Area has often prided itself on leading the state on environmental issues, yet the region is also characterized by an unequal distribution of environmental burdens and opportunities.

Twenty years ago, the United Church of Christ released a landmark study, “Toxic Wastes and Race,” demonstrating that people of color in the United States were more likely to live near environmental hazards. In 2007, many of the Bay Area’s communities of color remain concerned about the environmental exposures they confront every day.

In Bayview-Hunters Point on the southeastern side of San Francisco, residents complained about a power plant for years before finally securing its shutdown in 2006. In West Oakland, community leaders have launched an effort to reduce emissions from idling trucks and other Port of Oakland activities. In Richmond, neighbors have worked to persuade the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to restrict flaring activities at the area’s large refineries.

Are these isolated instances or is there a systemic pattern of environmental inequality in the Bay? To address this, we amassed data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on toxic-air releases from large industrial facilities and estimated health risks from air toxics emitted from both mobile and stationary sources. Our results, available in a forthcoming study, are disturbing.

The facility-based toxic releases present a mirror image: two-thirds of those living within a mile of such facilities are people of color while two-thirds of those living more than 2 ½ miles away are white. Racial differences persist, even when we use statistical techniques to control for income levels, land-use patterns and other factors. For Latinos and Asians, those more likely to be near releases were “linguistically isolated,” a fact with important implications for community outreach and participation.

What happens when we add mobile and smaller sources to the picture? The neighborhoods with the lowest risk estimates are populated by about one-third minority residents while the areas with the highest risk are two-thirds minority — and once again, even when we control for income, land use and other measures, race still seems to matter.

What is to be done? New regulatory strategies should be guided by three basic principles. First, we need to consider cumulative impact. We regulate air quality on a source-by-source basis; this can lead to an accumulation of multiple emission sources in particular areas, all of which might be deemed acceptable on their own but when taken together threaten community health. Taking a neighborhood-based approach to regulation, including local permitting caps, could help.

Second, we need to take into account social vulnerability. Strikingly, we tend to overload hazardous facilities and traffic in those communities with the fewest economic resources and the lowest levels of health-care access. Regulatory agencies do consider the presence of “sensitive receptors,” by which they mean the very old and the very young. But age is not everything: piling hazards near the poor is a potential recipe for further widening health inequalities.

Third, we need to have meaningful community participation. Affected residents should be involved at every step in the process, identifying the scale of problems and the reach of solutions. It also means overcoming the language barriers faced by many immigrant communities — as well as the barriers that arise when technical documents are not translated into more accessible information.

While the air district says that environmental justice is a key priority, many affected communities are skeptical. The gap could be bridged by facilitating more open access to information and emissions inventories, collaborating with cities and counties to address incompatible land uses and unregulated sources, and developing ways to track and control “episodic” events — such as diesel emissions from construction equipment — that are not consistently monitored by regional databases.

We in the Bay Area can and should do better. We have, after all, helped lead California in going green. We should also lead California in going fair.

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