

## **Eastern Coachella Valley Breathes Easier – For Now – with the Shutdown of Desert View Power Plant**

The Desert View Power Plant, a towering presence in Mecca, California, has been a significant part of the Eastern Coachella Valley for decades. After 29 years of operation, its recent shutdown is a momentous event that underscores the growing concerns about its environmental impact and the loss of its sole customer, the Imperial Irrigation District (IID).

The Desert View facility, known for converting agricultural waste and wood debris into energy, has a long history of controversy. Environmental reviews by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed that the plant consistently exceeded legal limits for mercury, hydrochloric acid, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxide emissions from 2016 to 2021. These pollutants, posing severe health risks, have been a constant threat to the local population, contributing to respiratory problems and other chronic health issues.

Residents of the Eastern Coachella Valley, including many farmworkers, have expressed their distress over the pollution for years. Billowing smoke often drifts over homes, schools, and daycares, impacting the air quality and health of the community. Air quality is a core component of the social determinants of health. In this case, the often-terrible air quality in ECV is clearly a social determinant of poor health outcomes for residents. "My kids are always sick," says Veronica Argulo, a local resident whose children suffer from asthma exacerbated by the plant's emissions. They can't breathe, and they have to be on a breathing machine. It's non-stop."

The decision to cease operations came after IID, which had a power purchase agreement with Desert View, chose not to renew the contract. For Desert View, the loss of their only customer left the plant's future uncertain, prompting a pause in operations. Despite the shutdown, the plant's operator has expressed a commitment to resolving the environmental issues and is currently working with the EPA to address the violations.

The power plant closure aligns with broader regional health and environmental strategies. The Eastern Coachella Valley has been grappling with high levels of air pollution for too long. Local authorities and environmental groups have been strongly advocating for stricter regulations and cleaner technologies to combat the valley's air quality problems, but it has been extremely challenging to affect real change.

With Desert View shuttered for now, the EPA and the Cabazon Band of Cahuilla Indians have scheduled community meetings to discuss the future of the power plant and its impact on the local environment. These discussions are crucial for developing a sustainable path forward that balances energy production with environmental preservation and public health.

The Desert View Power Plant shutdown represents a critical moment for the Eastern Coachella Valley. It offers a chance to reevaluate and potentially reshape the region's energy landscape towards a cleaner, healthier future. As the community, environmental experts and regulatory bodies collaborate, the hope is that this marks the beginning of significant environmental recovery and health improvements for the residents affected by the plant's operations.

