

## **The Fight for Environmental Health in the Eastern Coachella Valley**

Nestled in the shadow of the shrinking Salton Sea, the Eastern Coachella Valley (ECV) is a region marked by both natural beauty and stark environmental challenges. This predominantly Hispanic, low-income community faces unique environmental health issues that underscore the broader struggle for environmental justice in America.

### **The Environmental Landscape**

The Eastern Coachella Valley, encompassing areas such as Mecca, Thermal, and Coachella, is heavily impacted by air pollution. Residents breathe air laced with dust from agricultural fields, emissions from unpaved roads, smog from nearby cities, and chemicals from agricultural burns and pesticides. The situation is exacerbated by the Salton Sea, whose receding waters expose toxic dust that the wind spreads across the region.

### **Health Impacts and Community Concerns**

The health implications for the residents are severe. In interviews conducted by Health Assessment and Research for Communities (HARC), a local nonprofit research and evaluation firm, residents expressed deep concerns about the quality of air and its impact on their health. They reported frequent occurrences of asthma, allergies, and other respiratory issues, especially among children. One resident from North Shore highlighted the struggles of her asthmatic child, emphasizing how the poor air quality restricts her outdoor activities and exacerbates her condition.

Moreover, the community is also concerned about the effects of pesticide exposure from the surrounding agricultural activities. The use of these chemicals not only contaminates the air but also affects the water quality, posing a double threat to the residents.

### **Socio-Economic and Environmental Disparities**

Environmental burdens in the Eastern Coachella Valley are compounded by socio-economic disparities. The region's low-income status means fewer resources to combat environmental hazards and less access to healthcare. This disparity is evident when comparing living conditions with those in the wealthier Western Coachella Valley, home to luxury resorts and affluent communities.

The CEVA (Cumulative Environmental Vulnerability Assessment), created by the UC Davis Center for Regional Change in partnership with local organizations such as Eastern Coachella Valley Building Healthy Communities and California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc., reveals that residents in the ECV face significant and overlapping environmental hazards and social vulnerability that far exceed those in the Western Coachella Valley and the county as a whole. Key challenges include agricultural pesticide applications, drinking water quality, and housing quality.

The CEVA project utilized two indices: the Cumulative Environmental Hazards Index (CEHI) and the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI). These indices highlighted the areas with the highest levels of environmental hazards and the fewest social resources, identifying the ECV as an area needing urgent and coordinated action to protect community health and well-being.

### **Community Efforts and Resilience**

Despite these challenges, the community remains resilient and hopeful. Many residents are willing to change their lifestyles to reduce environmental harm, reflecting a strong communal spirit and a desire for a healthier future. Local organizations, backed by grants and research from groups like HARC and the UC Davis Center for Regional Change, are working tirelessly to bring attention to these issues and advocate for better policies and resources.

Residents envision an ideal environment that includes clean air, safe drinking water, more green spaces, and effective waste management. Their aspirations are simple yet profound: to live in a healthy environment where they and their children can thrive.

### **Addressing the Challenges**

To address the myriad environmental and social challenges, several actions have been proposed:

1. **Improved Monitoring and Enforcement:** Enhanced air quality monitoring, water quality testing, and stricter enforcement of environmental regulations are crucial.
2. **Infrastructure Investments:** Proactive infrastructure investments to improve housing conditions, wastewater management, and transportation access are necessary to build a healthier and more equitable community.
3. **Community Engagement:** Increasing community engagement in environmental decision-making can empower residents and foster collaborative solutions.
4. **Economic Opportunities:** Supporting job training programs and attracting environmentally-friendly businesses can provide economic uplift and reduce the socio-economic disparities in the region.

### **The Role of Collaborative Efforts**

The CEVA report emphasizes that no single entity can address these challenges alone. Success requires collaboration between public agencies, elected officials, foundations, businesses, advocates, and residents. By combining efforts, these groups can implement strategic and coordinated actions to improve the health and well-being of the ECV.

Organizations like Pueblo Unido CDC, the Environmental Justice Taskforce, and the Inland Congregations United for Change are key players in this collaborative effort. They work on various fronts, from providing clean drinking water and affordable housing to advocating for better transportation and healthcare services.

The environmental health crisis in the Eastern Coachella Valley is a microcosm of the broader environmental justice movement. It highlights the need for targeted interventions that address both environmental and socio-economic disparities. By amplifying the voices of those most affected and pushing for equitable solutions, there is hope for a healthier and more just future for the Eastern Coachella Valley and beyond.



