



Activist Group Measures Pollution When Government Doesn't

Project Sends Out Young Volunteers with Detectors, Cameras, GPS

By NED POTTER



9-year-old Andrea Sanchez holds an air pollution detector that she and other young people in Brownsville, Tex., will use to monitor the local environment. It's part of a national project now being tested in four predominantly Hispanic areas. (Brownsville Community Health Center.)

In Watsonville, Calif., the strawberries in the fields are "as big as plums," says Roy Jiminez.

They are also grown, he says, with thousands of pounds of pesticides, and he suspects that many of the farm workers who come to his clinic are paying a price for that.

"There are horror stories about people with cancer, skin problems, respiratory diseases that are off the charts," he tells ABC News.

But whenever the California Department of Pesticide Regulation comes to check on things, "the farmers and

growers' groups are hovering over them to make sure there's no disruption.

"In no way does the state ever stop production," says Jiminez, "even though in some cases I think they should."

Jiminez is head of a community health center called Salud Para La Gente ("Health for the People"). He and groups in three other parts of the country have joined in a new campaign: if others don't look out for the health of people in their area, they'll do it themselves.

Teams With Pollution Detectors

They are training volunteers — young people, in most cases— with pollution detectors, GPS locators and video cameras. The teams will go checking for air and water pollution in their neighborhoods.

The "Eco-Pacs" they carry will measure carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, water acidity and other signs of pollution. Where they find it, they document it, to pass on to government agencies, or use in campaigns to protect public health.

The project is called HEAN — Health Environment Action Network — and its beginning efforts are in areas with large Hispanic populations.

"The EPA measurements are often not in the communities where people live," says Dr. Jane Delgado, president of the National Alliance for Hispanic Health, which organized the project. She's been pushing and prodding the government in Washington for years, trying to persuade regulators to do their jobs more aggressively.

"Many of the ways we look at health are wrong," she says. "A lot of it has to do with the environment. Asthma rates are going up because of the air we're breathing."

The equipment costs about \$2,500 for each team. Delgado has arranged funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, which has agreed to pay for test projects in four parts of the country.

Not 'Anti-Development'

Watsonville is one of the four "beta sites." Similar efforts are starting in Detroit; along the Mexican border near Brownsville, Tex.; and in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, N.Y.

"For the first time, we're going to have real environmental data in the hands of the community," says Elizabeth Yeampierre, who's heading the Brooklyn effort.

Yeampierre is head of a local group called UPROSE — the United Puerto Rican Organization of Sunset Park. "It's not like we're anti-development," she says, "but there are better, greener ways of doing things.

"When you pollute, you're destroying the human infrastructure of the community."

Yeampierre has helped stop the construction of a power plant in her area, and had a part in the building of new port facilities for container ships. Historically, she says, companies have put their plants in poor neighborhoods because they run into less local resistance.

Pollution, Race and Poverty

"I can't tell you what's in their minds," she says, "but if you do a survey, you'll find that a disproportionate number are in places that are poor, and that are populated by people of color."

That's a major issue on the border between Texas and Mexico, where water quality has been one of many troublesome issues at the Brownsville Community Health Center. Alix Flores, the Special Projects Director there, says he hopes to involve kids as young as fifth and sixth grade, so that they start looking out for themselves early.

"A lot of the issues we deal with are directly related to poverty," says Flores. "The people here, it hits them harder."

What difference might it make for kids to patrol with pollution monitors? In some cases, they may well find health hazards. In the meantime, though, Yeampierre, the organizer in New York, says they're getting a real-life lesson in how to protect their own well-being.

"They see they have to become stakeholders in their own lives," she says. "It's exciting, isn't it?"

Organizers say they hope the pollution monitoring will be empowering. Many of the farm workers around Watsonville are undocumented aliens, says Jiminez, though their children, born in the U.S., are legally citizens. He finds that such families are often afraid to speak up for themselves, and ensure that they're breathing healthy air.

"We want to reframe questions about the environment and people's health," says organizer Delgado. "We want to give people the idea that they can go out and make change."

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