

THE ENVIRONMENT

The Valley's unique geography combined with the prevalence of heavy industry generates a toxic mix of pollutants which persist in air and water. The California Environmental Protection Agency identifies much of the region as being the most overburdened in the state based on a combination of multiple environmental hazards and socio-economic factors.¹ County residents face daily exposure to air pollutants, dust, and chemicals that become trapped by an inversion layer of warm air created by the three mountain ranges surrounding the Valley. In fact, Bakersfield consistently ranks among the cities with the worst air quality by the American Lung Association.² This daily exposure to poor air quality heightens resident's risk of asthma, other respiratory and cardiovascular illness, and cancer. Many drinking water aquifers in Kern County are contaminated with naturally-occurring and human-induced nitrates, arsenic, and other chemicals, forcing residents to either purchase bottled water and increase monthly expenses or drink, bathe, and wash in municipal water that may put their families at risk.

Compounding the area's geographic vulnerability is the fact that Kern County is home to two of the world's largest industries, both of which pose substantial threats to human health and the environment: industrial agriculture and oil. The agriculture industry relies heavily on pesticides laden with chemicals that pose health threats to residents and workers near application sites, risk leeching into groundwater aquifers, and significantly contribute to the extremely poor air quality in Kern. Large industrial animal operations, and dairies in particular, contaminate water and emit noxious odors, methane and other dangerous air pollutants. Oil and gas operations threaten groundwater contamination from drilling, waste disposal, and injection wells. Residents near fracking or oil drilling operations may be exposed to gases and chemicals that escape from drilling sites and ruptured or leaking pipelines. Throughout Kern, operations supporting both of these industries are sited dangerously close to homes and schools, increasing the risk and negative health effects they pose to communities. And both industries emit large quantities of greenhouse gases that exacerbate localized climate change impacts, putting residents at greater risk of extreme heat, drought and valley fever.

Policy Solutions

Prevent Incompatible Land Uses by Creating Human Health Buffer Zones

- Establish an at least one and ½ mile buffer zone between oil and gas extraction operations and sensitive receptors such as schools and residences.
- Establish an at least one mile buffer zone between pesticide application and sensitive receptors such as schools and residences.
- Establish an at least one mile buffer zone between dairies and sensitive receptors such as schools and residences.

Provide Clean and Affordable Drinking Water for All

- Create new and pursue existing state and federal funding assistance programs to assist small and mid-size communities to pay for new water treatment systems and prevent increased water rates.

- Create fund or other mechanism to subsidize water rates for low-income households.
- Ensure that small communities are connected to existing water systems and other infrastructure.
- Install water filtration units at every school in districts where drinking water fails to meet state standards.

Reduce Industry Impacts through Improved Regulation and Control

- Impose more health protective air pollution standards on dairies.
- Require notification and place restrictions on time and place of pesticide application to avoid potential exposures at schools, including a prohibition of pesticides near schools during school hours.
- Restrict the transportation, application, and disposal of sewage sludge in Kern County.
- Support a statewide ban on extreme oil and gas extraction operations such as hydraulic fracturing, cyclical steam, and acidization.



Access to Alternative Technology

- Establish cost-effective funding mechanisms to provide rooftop solar to low-income households and renters.
- Promote green industry by providing or supporting green jobs training and hiring assistance with an emphasis on re-training displaced oil workers.
- Establish adequate infrastructure and cost-effective funding mechanisms to provide Kern County residents access to electric vehicles.

Community members at the Kern Board of Supervisors meeting in 2015, demanding fair environmental regulations on oil and gas drilling.