

OUR VALLEY, OUR VOICES

KERN COMMUNITIES' POLICY PLATFORM



CRPE

CENTER ON
RACE, POVERTY
& THE ENVIRONMENT



INTRODUCTION

Kern County has a long history of political action as the birthplace of the farmworker rights movement and the training grounds for generations of civil rights leaders who continue to fight for safe and fair working conditions across the nation. The legacy of Cesar Chavez and “can do” organizing remains evident today as residents in the small, close-knit communities that dot the landscape are committed to working together to improve the vitality and livability of the region. However, Kern County is a region replete with paradoxes, many of which create significant challenges to achieving healthy lives and neighborhoods. Kern County feeds the nation with fresh produce, while the many farmworker communities within it do not have access to affordable healthy food. It produces billions of dollars from oil and agricultural production, but is one of the poorest regions in the country with some of the highest rates of unemployment. It is in one of the fastest growing regions in terms of solar and wind power, but also produces 75% of the oil in California. It conveys clean water to Southern California via the California Aqueduct, yet its residents rely on expensive contaminated well-water for drinking and washing.

Community leaders have banded together across the region to address these challenges head-on through identifying and advocating for solution-oriented policies to improve the quality of life for all Kern County residents. These leaders have collaboratively identified a set of concrete, achievable policy priorities that will promote a clean and healthy environment, enhance public health and safety, improve public infrastructure and services, and increase job opportunities and economic development. The policy platform presented here is designed to guide local, state, and federal decision-making processes in order to bring positive change to the region.

THE PROCESS

Applying the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment’s (CRPE) “from the ground up” philosophy to help residents identify policy priorities to improve quality of life in Kern County, CRPE convened residents from five communities: Delano, Shafter, Lamont, Greenfield, and Arvin for the purpose of creating a community-driven policy platform. The day-long convening involved community mapping exercises, visioning exercises, facilitated small group brainstorming sessions, collective problem and solution identification, community caucuses, and community voting. By the end of this process, participants identified a set of shared policy principles that would improve conditions in communities across Kern County. Residents focused on four key policy areas: Environment; Health & Safety; Public Services & Infrastructure; and Jobs & the Economy. In each of these categories, Kern residents highlighted primary concerns and recommended specific policy actions to address them. These recommendations are directed toward local, state and federal policymakers to guide their decisions in ways that achieve sustainable and equitable improvements to the quality of life in Kern County for all its residents.

KEY POLICY AREAS

1) The Environment

2) Health & Safety

3) Public Services and Infrastructure

4) Jobs & the Economy



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.



Provide Clean and Affordable Drinking Water for All

- 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.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Bakersfield, the Kern County seat, ranks only behind Fresno and Stockton in U.S. municipalities with the smallest proportion of residents who report feeling safe and secure in their city.³ Crime levels are an important element of feeling safe. Kern County is a high crime area, ranking in the top 10 western metropolitan areas for violent crime.⁴ Perhaps even more unsettling however, is that Kern County is home to the deadliest police force in the nation.⁵ Bakersfield police killed 13 people in 2015, far surpassing even the largest police departments in the United States.

Kern County also ranks near the bottom for most health indicators. It ranks 48 out of 58 California counties for overall death rate; ranks 54 out of 58 for deaths due to coronary heart disease; 52 out of 58 for chronic lower respiratory disease; and ranks as the county with the highest rate of death by diabetes.⁶ Despite the high disease incidence in the region, nearly 20 percent of Kern residents remain without health care coverage.⁷ In a recent community health needs assessment, Kern residents reported air quality, obesity, asthma, lack of exercise, and diabetes as the most serious health problems impacting their lives personally.⁸ Poor transportation planning in and between Kern County cities exacerbates these health problems by increasing vehicle pollution, impeding pedestrian and bicycle safety, and encouraging sedentary behavior.



CRPE staff and residents advocating for environmental health policies in Kern County, in 2016.

Policy Solutions

Improve Community Relationships with and Accountability of Police Officers and Departments

- Require body-cameras to be worn by all on-duty police officers and sheriffs.
- Require additional education and other qualifications of police officers to match the needs of prevailing local demographics, including the ability to speak Spanish or other relevant language, cultural awareness, and training on community policing.
- Adopt local hiring policies to increase the number of officers with established relationships and knowledge of the areas they are policing.
- Institute a rotating police liaison and involve community in the selection of the liaison to promote open communication and conflict resolution between residents and police departments.

Ensure Adequate and Accessible Health Care for All Kern County Residents

- Identify areas with insufficient health care facilities and coverage in the county, including areas where response times are unreasonably long and distances to hospitals are unreasonably far.
- Ensure an adequate number of health care facilities and clinics throughout the county.
- Advocate for affordable and universal health care coverage for all residents regardless of citizenship status.

Ensure Safe and Equitable Transit Solutions

- Work with residents and schools to identify safe route needs including sidewalks, stoplights and stop signs, street lights, and bike lanes on routes commonly used by children.
- Create technical assistance and set asides for rural communities within existing transit funding programs.
- Seek state and federal funding to pay for transit infrastructure to increase pedestrian and bicyclist safety.



PUBLIC SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Many Kern County communities lack access to basic public services such as clean, safe, and affordable municipal water and sewer systems. Small, rural communities are least equipped to pay for the high capital costs to construct much-needed infrastructure because they lack the economies of scale necessary to spread the costs of multi-million dollar sewer and drinking water treatment plants across many residents. Until state and county representatives develop policies to address this inherent structural barrier, existing infrastructure will continue to crumble, and the most basic of services and amenities will remain beyond the financial reach for those in need. Current municipal, regional and state-wide policies further disadvantage low-income, rural communities through programs, funding formulas and eligibility criteria that favor larger, wealthier regions. In order for Kern County to provide adequate public services to all its residents, it must adopt policies to proactively identify and address inequities in access to basic public services and infrastructure, and seek various funding and investment opportunities to ensure that its low-income communities and communities of color are not left behind.

Policy Solutions

Provide Adequate and Reasonably-Priced Municipal Services

- Establish fund to assist with offsetting capital costs for water and sewer systems while avoiding expensive rate increases for areas with small ratepayer bases.
- Adopt a services bill of rights for all communities to establish minimum requirements for providing adequate public services.
- Identify any public infrastructure deficiencies including corroding pipelines, septic systems, needed water treatment facilities, and missing curbs and gutters, and establish short, medium and long-term plans to address and fund needed infrastructure improvements.
- Target federal, state and local funds for investments that benefit overburdened communities as identified by CalEnviroScreen.
- Adopt and implement policies and guidelines to encourage and speed-up the connection of under-served areas to existing infrastructure.

Provide Better Transit Alternatives and Solutions

- Provide public transportation between and within communities, with access for the elderly and disabled.
- Improve road and sidewalk quality and safety, including increasing the frequency of road maintenance, increasing the number of crosswalks, and re-lining road markings.
- Plan safer and more efficient highway connections and routes to common destinations.

Provide Public Amenities to Strengthen Community Livability

- Analyze and address any inequities in parks and open spaces between higher and lower income census tracts.
- Plan for and invest in more parks, recreation centers, farmer's markets and open spaces.
- Include plans for plazas in city centers and downtowns in any revitalization efforts.

Ensure Kern Residents' Access to Clean Technology

- Establish cost-effective funding mechanisms to provide rooftop solar to low-income households and renters.
- Establish adequate infrastructure and cost-effective funding mechanisms to provide Kern County residents access to electric vehicles.

JOBS & THE ECONOMY

Kern County is experiencing an economic crisis due to plummeting oil prices and an epic drought. The unemployment rate remains above 10 percent, well above the state average.⁹ Yet, Kern County has made little movement toward a more diversified economy. Kern County relies heavily on a few extractive commodities, making the economy vulnerable to unpredictable factors such as variations in harvests and price slumps. A recent analysis of metropolitan areas' ability to cope with change ranks the entire San Joaquin Valley very low on the resilience capacity index.¹⁰ Resilience capacity is assessed in relation to economic capacity (income inequality, diversification, regional affordability, business environment), socio-demographic capacity (educational attainment, without disability, out of poverty, health insured), and civic connectivity capacity (voter engagement, civic infrastructure, homeownership, metropolitan stability). The Valley needs to diversify its economy, prepare its workforce for emerging trends, retain skilled workers, and increase wages and standard of living. In doing so, Kern must include poor people and people of color in any emerging economic opportunities. Residents identified the need to improve retention of college-bound Valley residents, increase local education and training programs, and adopt programs to spur green businesses and a more diversified job market.

Policy Solutions

Increase Local Opportunities for Kern County Students and Young Adults

- Provide stipends or scholarships to college-bound students who commit to returning to the region for at least two years after graduation.
- Restore funding for vocational training in local high schools.
- Invest in job training programs and higher education opportunities in the Central Valley.

Provide Support for Small Businesses and Cooperatives

- Adopt policies to assist community cooperatives and community gardens to sell produce to schools and at farmer's markets.
- Provide assistance to new small businesses, especially minority or women owned, in the form of grants, guidance, and trainings.
- Promote job opportunities and training in new sustainable sectors, such as rooftop solar and energy efficiency. Specifically target resources for retraining workers from industries with sizable job losses such as the oil industry.

Ensure Safe Working Conditions and a Living Wage

- Require that employers pay a living wage that allows employees to meet basic needs, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, child care and basic transportation.
- Enforce worker safety laws and regulations which require clean and sufficient drinking water, clean bathrooms, shade from the heat, access to medical care when requested and limited exposure to health damaging toxics.
- Adopt enforcement mechanisms to increase compliance with local hire provisions.
- Pass immigration reform to increase protections for undocumented agricultural workers.

CONCLUSION

In developing this policy platform, residents hope that local and state representatives value the insights, the expertise, and the experiences of Kern County residents who are committed to making their home a better place for all. By focusing on the priorities identified by Kern residents, decision-makers have a unique opportunity to build fruitful partnerships with their constituents that can deepen and broaden over time. Together, we can build a better future for Kern County.



CRPE staff and Kern residents demand climate leadership in Oakland, CA 2014.

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