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Residents are airing concerns about Wilmington oil refinery: Guest commentary



By Magali Sanchez-Hall

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For more than 20 years, I've lived on the side of Wilmington known as "Ghost Town" with my daughter and mother, just 500 yards away from the Tesoro Refinery. Like most families here, we keep our doors closed so that we don't breathe in the toxic fumes that are slowly killing us.

Wilmington is 85 percent low-income Latino, and every neighbor on my street has a family member who has died of cancer or survived cancer. I worry about my mother, who has suffered for years with a cough for years that isn't getting better, and the many children who attend school within a mile of the refinery.

From out of my window at night, I see the sky lit a bright orange from the flares at the refinery. When nobody else sees what's going on, you have to be the watchdog.

When I first learned Tesoro would be merging with BP Carson to create the largest refinery on the West Coast, it confirmed that those companies believe our families are worth less than their dirty profits.

The \$460 million expansion across 950 acres would build 3.4 million barrels of storage tanks, almost doubling to accommodate the switch to high benzene crude oil, and will process more than 380,000 barrels of oil a day. Tesoro claims that upgrading refinery equipment will reduce their emissions. But in fact, it will increase VOCs (volatile organic compounds), including especially dangerous toxics like benzene.

Bakken crude oil is also highly explosive and emits high levels of greenhouse gases during extraction. Tesoro has a history of leaks and flares, with a sulfur explosion just last year, and this heavy expansion will only increase health and safety risks endangering the communities of Wilmington, Carson and West Long Beach.

Families like mine are impacted first and worst by Tesoro and five other refineries in our backyards. They can't continue to tell us that toxic fumes are just an odor.

We have the right to speak out against these refineries that are polluting our air. That's why I have been knocking on my neighbors' doors to make sure they would be out April 29 for the People's Climate March against the expansion of Tesoro.

This expansion undermines our right to clean air and threatens the health of our community and our climate. During the march, people would finally see exactly what my family and neighbors experience every day.

Big polluters like Tesoro need to be held accountable for their attacks on our health and safety. Recently, a study by the Southern California Air Quality Management District found that refineries in the Los Angeles region emit six to 12 times more VOCs than they report, and that Tesoro's benzene emissions are 43 times higher than reported.

We must improve air quality and public health by cutting emissions directly at the source, instead of investing in an expansion that residents and city officials are all opposed to. As the legislature decides how to best meet our 2030 climate goals, direct emissions reductions must be a priority in legislation to effectively address health impacts, reduce asthma rates, and prevent cancer and other illnesses. Our current system is giving polluters too many loopholes to continue to pollute. and Tesoro is one of the biggest users of offsets bought out of state.

I want all the families in Wilmington to live in a place where they can breathe and where we don't have to worry about any of our neighbors dying. California still has toxic air-quality hot spots that our state needs to fix so our children can sleep better at night.

Wilmington is overburdened by pollution and needs sustainable solutions that will transform "Ghost Town" into a healthy environment and thriving economy with clean energy jobs. We deserve clean air in Wilmington.

Magali Sanchez-Hall is a resident of Wilmington and a member of Communities for a Better Environment.