

Community Voices: Salas puts Kern residents' health on a back burner

- By Caroline Farrell
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Kern County and Kings County are home to some of the most polluted air in the United States. Efforts to reduce greenhouse gases are of significant importance to communities here on the ground, but our representatives in Sacramento are not helping the fight. The current rules to curb pollution are not protective enough, and communities in Kern and Kings are paying with their health.

The same sources that produce greenhouse gases also emit the kind of pollution that plagues Kern and Kings counties. Smog forming pollution in the summer, as well as small particles that penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream, can cause premature death and a host of other health problems. The link between air pollution in the Valley and greenhouse gases that warm the planet demonstrate the need for climate policy like Assembly Bill 378, which would have helped Valley residents breathe easier, but legislators like Assemblyman Rudy Salas voted no. With approximately 1,200 Valley residents dying prematurely because of our bad air, such a no vote shows Salas' priorities.

Decisions like no on AB 378 cost low-income communities and communities of color the most. These decisions shift the burden of paying for pollution away from the corporations responsible and onto residents who have little say in the matter. The communities forced to breathe dirty air every day pay for pollution with their health, with visits to the doctor, inhalers, long-term respiratory treatments, and missed work and school. AB 378 would help mitigate the discrepancies in California's climate policies; Salas' no vote is an example of how the health of Kern and Kings counties residents is being put on the back burner in Sacramento.

According to the 2017 American Lung Association State of the Air report, the top four areas with the worst ozone pollution in the entire country are Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Fresno, and Visalia. The biggest producers of greenhouse gases in those areas are located in low-income communities and communities of color, where residents living next to polluting factories, freeways, refineries

and power plants breathe dirty air. In Kern County, more than 300,000 residents live within one mile of an oil well.

Asthma attacks and other respiratory issues are prevalent in our communities, causing frequent trips to the emergency room and slow lung development in children. A UCLA study funded by the California Air Resources Board found that low-income populations and racial minorities in the state are exposed to higher levels of air pollutants than other California residents, which causes increased asthma-related difficulties like asthma attacks, daily medication use, work absences, and emergency room visits.

The current cap and trade system in California is not achieving the win-win outcomes of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving local air quality. The Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment is working with the California Environmental Justice Alliance to mobilize people in impacted communities for more effective carbon pricing, because climate change impacts them first and worst.

Extreme heat and increased storms will intensify existing air quality issues for communities in the Valley with the fewest resources to adapt. California must achieve the most effective and direct greenhouse gas emissions reductions in order to address these issues.

The loopholes available in California's current cap and trade system will not work if the state is serious about its ambitious climate targets for 2030. Environmental justice groups like CRPE and CEJA are calling for higher prices on carbon without loopholes to ensure that the industries contributing to climate change pay a fair price for their environmental and economic impacts on the climate.

As Gov. Jerry Brown continues to meet with world leaders on climate policy, he and the rest of California's leadership must stay committed to solutions that will reduce high levels of air pollution in our most vulnerable communities in the state. Before California's cap and trade program is cast as a model for other nations or states, we must address the environmental justice issues around cap and trade here at home.

To be a true world climate leader, California must be bolder to ensure we have localized air quality improvements within the state — only then can we teach the world how to fight global climate change.

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