

The Mercury News

California's 'new' environmentalism: Toxic air, tainted water driving climate- change debate

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SACRAMENTO – Assemblywoman Cristina Garcia's hometown of Bell Gardens is so notoriously contaminated by toxic waste sites and freeways stacked with diesel trucks that some residents of nearby towns call it "Bell Garbage."

Garcia channeled her anger into a successful 2012 Assembly campaign, and today she is in the vanguard of a movement that is redefining environmentalism in California. She and her political allies are warriors for "environmental justice" who argue that Gov. Jerry Brown and state lawmakers should pay more attention to the polluted air and cancer-causing toxins plaguing California's poor and working-class neighborhoods as they pursue the lofty goal of saving the planet from global warming.

"We've done a lot for this global environment, but we've done very little for the needs of these communities," said Garcia, a Mexican-American who heads the Assembly Natural Resources Committee.

Garcia's allies in the Legislature include Latino, black and Asian-American Democrats representing districts from Richmond to the Inland Empire who would have felt out of place in California's lily-white environmental movement that grew up in wealthy coastal communities in the late 1960s and 1970s. Their ranks include two powerful Latino Democrats — Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon and Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León — who have lent support and visibility to the cause.

"What's changing today is the message," said Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella, a key player in the movement. "We're not talking about the extinction of polar bears and the melting of ice caps. We're talking about people who can't breathe."

The fledgling alliance between established environmental organizations and environmental justice groups has complicated debates over climate policy — such as whether California should keep allowing companies to pay to release greenhouse gasses through the "cap and trade" market or levy a carbon tax instead. Environmental justice advocates are generally opposed to cap-and-trade because they believe its industry-wide

caps do little to curb local pollution, while many other environmentalists see it as an effective tool.

But many political observers feel that a partnership between the two factions will only strengthen the environmental movement as it gears up to fight the Trump administration's plan to roll back environmental regulations.

"It's very refreshing to see other legislators come to the forefront to say the fight for clean air is consistent with the fight to reduce climate change," said former Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, who co-authored the landmark 2006 climate-change bill that allowed the state to start the cap-and-trade program. "It does us no good to say that we're reducing our CO2 emissions by X number of metric tons per year when kids are getting sick with asthma in the Central Valley and in the cities."

Nearly 5 million Californians have been diagnosed with asthma, and the state's poorest residents are four times as likely as the wealthiest to be hospitalized because of the chronic lung disease, according to the California Department of Public Health.

For years, Democrats from economically depressed districts, particularly in the more conservative Central Valley, have been reluctant to support tougher environmental regulations even though their constituents breathe some of the dirtiest air in the nation. Conventional political wisdom holds that voting green could cost candidates lucrative backing from industry groups and support from constituents worried about the economic fallout of pushing businesses too hard.

"Legislators in (these) districts in the past were totally insensitive to environmental concerns because they didn't see it affecting their constituents," said Kathryn Phillips, executive director of Sierra Club California.

But political experts say that as Latinos — who tend to lean left on environmental issues — grow in number and become more involved in politics, the calculus is changing. Once a district begins to demand cleaner air and drinking water, the question becomes: "Is the threat of industry coming after you with a well-funded challenger greater than the threat of your constituents turning against you?" said Melissa Michelson, a political science professor at Menlo College in Atherton.

That's exactly what happened to Assemblywoman Cheryl Brown of San Bernardino, who was dubbed "Chevron Cheryl" by environmental and labor groups for her industry-friendly record. She was defeated in November by Eloise Gómez Reyes, a more progressive Democrat.

Cristina Garcia — running on an anti-corruption platform — beat former Assemblyman Tom Calderon, whose family dynasty had controlled the Southern California seat for 14 years. Last year, he was sentenced to federal prison for laundering bribes given to his brother, former Sen. Ron Calderon, who is also now in federal prison.

Garcia said she told herself she'd never return to Bell Gardens after leaving for college, but when she moved back to care for her ailing parents — after years of enjoying California's natural wonders — a sense of injustice came into sharp focus. Last year, she carried two successful bills to fund the testing and cleanup of lead in the soil and groundwater at a shuttered Exide Technologies plant in nearby Vernon, potentially contaminating 10,000 homes, parks and schools.

Environmentalists are also optimistic about a new assemblyman in Fresno: Joaquin Arambula, a physician who last spring replaced the business-friendly leader of the Democrats' moderate caucus, Henry Perea — who was just hired to lobby for the Western States Petroleum Association in Sacramento. In August, Arambula voted for a landmark measure mandating greenhouse-gas reductions, Senate Bill 32, that Perea had helped to defeat the year before.

Another key player in the new movement is Assemblyman Rob Bonta, a Filipino-American Democrat from Oakland, who said that he thinks about environmental policy in human terms — “that little boy or girl who lives in West Oakland and through no fault of their own lives in a place right beside the port where there are emissions and particulates in the air.”

Rendon, the Assembly speaker, said he believes environmental politics in the Capitol are simply catching up to public opinion. He points to one 2015 poll by the Public Policy Institute of California that found blacks, Latinos and Asian-Americans were more worried about poor air quality and the effect of global warming than white Californians.

One powerful new force behind the shift is the California Environmental Justice Alliance. The umbrella organization — made up of such groups as the Oakland-based Asian Pacific Islander Network and Communities for a Better Environment — began grading all 120 state lawmakers annually in 2014.

No one scored 90 percent on the first report card, noted its Oakland-based co-director, Amy Vanderwarker. This year 38 state lawmakers, including some Democrats from impoverished districts, earned perfect scores by approving key bills in the last legislative session — and Gov. Brown brought up his previously failing grade to 100 percent by signing them.

Last session, Speaker Rendon handpicked Eduardo Garcia to work with then-Sen. Fran Pavley, an environmental champion from Agoura Hills, on a second run at SB 32, the bill to cut greenhouse-gas emissions by 2030. The measure passed.

Garcia is now back at the table as the Legislature considers Brown's request to extend the state's cap-and-trade program past 2020 by a two-thirds vote. Among the lawmakers pushing for an environmental justice approach are Bonta; Cristina Garcia; Chinese-American Assemblyman Phil Ting, D-San Francisco; Indo-American Assemblyman Ash Kalra, D-San Jose; and African-American Assemblymen Chris Holden, D-Pasadena, and Tony Thurmond, D-Richmond.

Regardless of what happens with the program, those in the new environmental movement are “going to rearrange politics in California for decades to come,” predicts freshman Sen. Henry Stern, D-Calabasas, a climate-change lawyer who succeeded Pavley last year.

“I think they are in the driver’s seat here,” Stern said. “They can seize the mantle.”

LAWMAKERS WITH PERFECT SCORES

The California Environmental Justice Alliance this year gave perfect scores to 38 state legislators based on their votes last year. Here are the Bay Area and Central Coast lawmakers who made the list:

Senators

Jim Beall, D-San Jose

Mark Leno, D-San Francisco*

Bill Monning, D-Monterey

Bob Wieckowski, D-Fremont

Assembly members

Susan Bonilla, D-Concord*

Rob Bonta, D-Oakland

David Chiu, D-San Francisco

Evan Low, D-Cupertino

Bill Quirk, D-Hayward

Mark Stone, D-Santa Cruz

Tony Thurmond, D-Richmond

Phil Ting, D-San Francisco

*Termed out in 2016

Source: California Environmental Justice Alliance
