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Why Are Local Leaders Not Addressing Wilmington's Environmental Crisis?



Ashley Hernandez, 23, stands in front of the Warren E&P Inc. oil drilling site that she can see from her bedroom window everyday. (Photo by Liberty Hill Foundation)

POSTED BY: [ANABELL ROMERO](#) JULY 20, 2016

From my earliest memories my home of Wilmington has been a place of flaring oil refineries and derricks that pull oil from the ground around the clock. The refineries flare often, releasing puffs of natural gas, including propane, ethylene, propylene, butadiene and butane into the air. Growing up, I remember pretending the oil derricks were giant dinosaurs towering above us in our parks and behind our churches.

Oil derricks are casually scattered throughout the neighborhood adjacent to residential backyards, retail stores, and daycare centers with no protection for our community. We are also exposed to five oil refineries in the nine-mile area that makes up Wilmington. We breathe different air, toxic air – air contaminated by the emissions produced by oil refineries.



Flaring happening at ConocoPhillips Refinery while children are at George De La Torre Junior Elementary School. (Photo by Ashley Hernandez)

The pollution created by these refineries is deeply affecting the health of residents in Wilmington. Not only does the poor air quality precipitate bloody noses and watery eyes for us, but the pollution and contaminants can also lead to long term health problems like asthma, cancer, birth defects and miscarriages.

It's no coincidence that we experience worse health outcomes when compared to other cities in the region. We are much more exposed to the major health risks caused by the oil industry's air pollution. In contrast to neighboring Ranchos Palos Verdes and other coastal communities, Wilmington is more vulnerable as it is in closer proximity to the refineries.

Momentum is building in Wilmington. Residents are beginning to demand the healthy environment we deserve. We are talking about these issues publicly, holding community meetings, and offering testimony at South Coast Air Quality District (SCAQMD) meetings. We are writing to the media inviting them to see the health and noise problems that exist here. We're beginning to take a stand.

But we need help. We need more support from local legislators. Assemblymember Mike Gipson, who represents Wilmington, can join our community movement and help us improve the air quality issues in Wilmington. Assemblymember Gipson can champion equitable clean energy and climate policies that would directly benefit neighborhoods already overburdened by pollution – low-income communities and communities of color like Wilmington.

Each year, the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) releases an [environmental justice scorecard](#) that assesses how well California's elected officials supported actions to address environmental issues that impact low-income communities and communities of color.

Assemblymember Gipson's score shows that he can do more to support us.

Assemblymember Gipson was one of the democratic leaders that pushed for removal of the oil reduction provision in last year's [Senate Bill 350](#) (Clean Air Reduction Act), which would have directly benefited Wilmington. He also recently signed onto an industry-driven proposal to roll back smog regulations, which was approved by the SCAQMD. Why is my representative siding with the oil industry over his constituents?



Children witnessing and breathing fumes coming out of a local refinery in Wilmington. (Photo by Ashley Hernandez)

Families, parents, and youth of Wilmington all want to engage Assemblymember Gipson on these issues. We are actively coming up with solutions to the air quality issues; like bringing more climate investments into Wilmington and encouraging stricter regulations on the many refineries in the area. Gipson could also actively support and help us grow programs like “Clean Up, Green Up,” a newly passed Los Angeles ordinance that will ensure the already existing laws and legislation around pollution are properly enforced in our community.

We deserve to breathe clean air and live without the fear, missed school days, and health problems that come with air contaminants and pollution. Together, we can ensure that residents in Wilmington can breathe clean air and live healthy, thriving lives.

You can help make a difference by [signing this petition](#) by Courage Campaign and sharing your comments on Assemblymember Gipson's ‘F’ score for failing to stand up for Wilmington over corporations or special interest groups. You can see his score here through [The People's Report Card of California](#).

(This is an opinion piece by Ashley Hernandez, a resident of Wilmington, Banning High School Alumni, and the Youth Organizer at Communities for a Better Environment)