

Going Beyond Toxics

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The next time you step outside in Eugene, Oregon, don't waste your breath. You're most likely surrounded by something that many Eugene residents don't ever experience: clean air. Head west on Highway 99 and the divide between East and West Eugene becomes even more apparent. "You can kind of tell we're in a different part of town," points out Alison Guzman, outreach coordinator at Beyond Toxics, a Eugene-based environmental justice organization. She's right: In stark contrast to the tall evergreens and lush foliage that surrounds much of East Eugene, the West Eugene area trades academia for industry as groves of conifers are swapped for smaller, unobtrusive shrubs.

But West Eugene differs from the areas around the University of Oregon in more than just looks. Traveling through West Eugene's Trainsong and Bethel neighborhoods, a casual observer wouldn't pick up on anything abnormal. However, the two areas are part of the West Eugene Industrial Corridor and are home to several hundred residents who have dealt with air pollution caused by wood treatment plants and scrap metal recycling facilities throughout the last decade. Beyond Toxics, which focuses primarily on pesticide control, and air and water quality, is now working with Centro LatinoAmericano, a social service group dedicated to providing resources for Latino families. The two organizations teamed up in 2010 to create community-based programs that address the environmental problems facing residents of the West Eugene Industrial Corridor, a large percentage of whom are minority populations, including many Latino families. "We surveyed about 330 houses," Guzman says.



A woman and her children walk through a West Eugene neighborhood affected by high toxicity levels.

Breathing troubles, indoors and out, have long hindered community members. The surveys collected data from homes and schools in the vicinity of the environmental hazards to pinpoint areas where the impact was strongest. Beyond Toxics and Centro LatinoAmericano found uncommonly high rates of asthma and respiratory issues in the homes they polled. Beyond Toxics also surveyed 11 Bethel district schools, including Cascade and Kalapuya Middle Schools and Willamette High School, where they found asthma rates as high as 20 percent. Guzman believes the high levels of respiratory problems among the community's youth highlight the immediacy with which the city should address the environmental hazards in the West Eugene neighborhoods. "Our job is to show that if this were another part of Eugene, things would happen quicker, or there wouldn't be an industry there in the first place. But because this is a lower income community, there are [fewer] options," Guzman says. She believes the primary focus of organizations like Beyond Toxics is to give community members the mindset that they can, in fact, have an impact on the environmental health of their neighborhoods.

West Eugene's environmental problems are not new. Pollution in the Trainsong area began in the 1960s, when trains stopped there for cleaning and maintenance. When the site was no longer used as a cleaning depot, the buildings around the cleaning site were torn down, which exposed asbestos. The toxin became airborne and contaminated nearby neighborhoods. The Bethel neighborhood, in the vicinity of industrial sites such as J.H. Baxter Wood Treatment Plant and Pacific Recycling, has been dealing with air pollution for about a decade as well. Marcela Mendoza, the executive director of Centro LatinoAmericano, remembers how the organization got involved with this project: "A large proportion of our clients live here. It's a low-income housing part of town," she says, noting that the nearby wood treatment plant affects the quality of life in the neighborhood. "Clients had been talking with case workers about the smell in the air," Mendoza says. She adds that Beyond Toxics approached Centro LatinoAmericano to collaborate on the Clean Air Act, asking for industries to abide by certain standards of emissions.

In an effort to help residents learn to recognize and act on environmental issues in the West Eugene Industrial Area, Beyond Toxics has developed a three-tier strategy. The first step is to raise awareness about the environmental problems affecting the neighborhoods. Second, to empower residents to take action. Finally, the organizations want to work with residents and families in developing an action plan. "It's important to get the community involved with making decisions for themselves," Guzman says.

In the meantime, Beyond Toxics is working to pinpoint the area's pollution sources by increasing community participation through an online mapping scheme. The map database is a place where community members can report specific environmental hazards they've been exposed to. "If the community could access this information, then it would change the dynamics of the solution," says Guzman, who notes that individual reports to large environmental agencies often get lost in the volumes of data they receive.

Although Beyond Toxics is still in the planning stages of its course of action, the group has focused on setting up meetings with the mayor and public health officials to bring the West Eugene environmental issues to the surface of public consciousness. "We hope to create a dialogue among stakeholders and bring major decision makers in the same room as community members," Guzman says.

However, even with this kind of progress, there are still huge obstacles ahead. Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy says she is fully aware of the problems residents in the industrial areas face. “Over the years, people have complained about the smell of creosote [from the Baxter wood treatment plant] and the plant has done some work to reduce their impact, but people still say some evenings they can’t open their windows because of the smell.” But the city can’t act on these issues, Piercy continues, because the emissions from Baxter alone do not violate Department of Environmental Quality standards. “No matter where you live, you should be able to open your windows—that’s a basic level of livability. But it’s hard when there’s no legal issue.”



Mayor Kitty Piercy points out areas in Eugene and Springfield affected by toxins.

Piercy notes that each group faces its own challenges: “In my work at the city, we have goals—good goals—that bump into each other. If you don’t want to sprawl, you live more densely,” she says, pointing out the dilemma the city faces between overcrowding residential areas and creating urban sprawl. Still, Piercy believes there are ways to improve the quality of life for people living near industrial sites in West Eugene. A proposed site for a new Bethel District school near Clear Lake Road borders a park on one side and an industrial area on the other. “Can homes be oriented toward the park and buffered from the industrial area so that it’s more livable?” Piercy asks. “The answers may be more nuanced than we think.”

Piercy acknowledges confronting polluters in the Bethel area is complicated because individual industries do not commit any official health violations, and the area is not in the jurisdiction of the City of Eugene. Though it’s a long and likely overwhelming process to address the issue of air pollution in a jurisdiction that isn’t even theirs, Piercy admits that it’s important for the City of Eugene, and all Oregonians, to make environmental health their problem. “I feel like we’re negligent as a state if we don’t know the combined effect of the industries in this area and what they do together. They’re near where people live too—but we need to have the right information,” she says.

Without a quick fix, such a widespread and ongoing problem has the potential to become discouraging for West Eugene residents and the organizations working with them. Mendoza stresses many of the residents are working to overcome cultural barriers and often don’t know where to seek assistance. “They don’t know where or how to ask for information, or even that they can ask for their right to be heard. That’s why the mission of our organization is “empowerment of the Latino community.” Though unfortunate, the lack of access to immediate solutions makes the work of groups like Beyond Toxics much more urgent. “I feel privileged to be working in the community to raise these issues up again,” Guzman says. “And I’m grateful for the confidence that the community has in our work.”