Health Policy Brief: Eastern Coachella Valley’s Environmental Threat

Executive summary

The Eastern Coachella Valley is a cross-roads of cultures which routinely faces environmental threats to the health and well-being of its residents. This geographic region is home to several bands of Native American tribes and migrant workers, all of whom exist below the poverty level. Many projects have been implemented with the intent to change these conditions, only to be faced with lack of resources and, more importantly, a lack of awareness and political concern. Conflicting priorities, land uses and cultural conditions have allowed these conditions to exist and proliferate for a number of years.

Introduction

The Eastern Coachella Valley (ECV) is located in the middle of Riverside County and is comprised of the disadvantaged communities of Indio, Coachella, Thermal, Oasis, Mecca, and North Shore. The ECV, primarily a rural area, is a major hub for agricultural production in Riverside County and California as a whole, representing $526 million in gross agricultural value. The Coachella Valley attracts an estimated 8.2 million international and domestic visitors each year to its many hotels, casinos, and golf course resorts, generating $2.5 billion annually in revenue. While most of these tourist attractions are located in the Western Coachella Valley, many of the workers who power this tourism economy live in the ECV. Within the ECV itself, tourist spending has been estimated at upwards of $230 million annually.

Native American lands with sovereign governments and limited local oversight, unincorporated communities that lack local governments, and non-citizen status of many residents (legal non-naturalized and undocumented immigrants) create a landscape of overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions making environmental, land use, health regulation, and democratic governance challenging for these residents.

Environmental hazards

Hazardous waste processing facilities, dump sites and sewage sludge piles sited on land controlled by Native American tribes dot the landscape surrounding these communities, creating their own environmental hazards, including drinking water contamination and significant air pollution from the interstate traffic and movement of commodities, both from truck and rail. Limited air and water quality monitors, enforcement capacities, and large strips of open unregulated land uses keep these significant environmental hazards invisible to the rest of the county and state.

Because ECV is primarily an agricultural area, pesticides are applied to nearby agricultural fields and the runoff contaminates local drinking water sources. Most ECV residents must rely on private well water because public water companies do not provide service to rural areas, due to infrastructure limitations and cost. These water resources have been found to contain unsafe levels of arsenic, lead, manganese, nitrates, chromium 6, and perchlorates. Residents of some mobile home parks with failing septic systems face health risks from contact with raw sewage.

Implications and recommendations

The purpose of this document is to create increased both awareness of these serious issues and investment in
environmental protection for these rural communities.

**Background on policy**

The Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (MSPA) provides employment-related protections to migrant and seasonal agricultural workers and is administered and enforced by the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor. Every non-exempt farm labor contractor, agricultural employer, and agricultural association must:

- Disclose the terms and conditions of employment to each migrant worker in writing at the time of recruitment and to each seasonal worker when employment is offered, in writing if requested;
- Post information about worker protections at the worksite;
- Pay each worker the wages owed when due and provide each with an itemized statement of earnings and deductions;
- Ensure that housing, if provided, complies with substantive federal and state safety and health standards;
- Ensure that each vehicle, if transportation is provided, meets applicable federal and state safety standards and insurance requirements and that each driver be properly licensed;
- Comply with the terms of any working arrangement made with the workers; and
- Make and keep payroll records for each employee for three years.

The protections do not apply to individuals who are independent contractors rather than employees. Agricultural workers can have more than one employer at the same time. Each "joint employer" is responsible for all employer obligations under the MSPA, but MSPA does not require the unnecessary duplication of effort. Thus, employer responsibility(ies) may be carried out by only one of the joint employers. However, the failure to provide the required protections will result in joint liability for all joint employers. Farm labor contractors are required to register with DOL.

**Farm workers fight for rights**

For more than a century, farmworkers had been denied a decent life in the fields and communities of California’s agricultural valleys. Essential to the state’s biggest industry, but only so long as they remained exploited and submissive farmworkers had tried but failed so many times to organize the giant agribusiness farms that most observers considered it a hopeless task.

But some things hadn't changed. Grape pickers in 1965 were making an average of $.90/hour, plus ten cents per "lug" (basket) picked. State laws regarding working standards were simply ignored by growers.

Farm labor contractors played favorites with workers, selecting friends first, sometimes accepting bribes. Child labor was rampant, and many workers were injured or died in easily preventable accidents. The average life expectancy of a farmworker was 49 years.

The Bracero program, an informal arrangement between the United States and Mexican governments, became Public Law 78 in 1951. Started during World War II as a program to provide Mexican agricultural workers to growers, it continued after the war.
Over time, however, farmworkers, led by Cesar Chavez, were able to call upon allies in other unions, in churches and in community groups affiliated with the growing civil rights movement, to put enough pressure on politicians to end the Bracero Program by 1964.

Two organizations attempted to represent and organize the farmworkers. One had been formed in 1959 by the AFL-CIO, called the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was started by a young Chicano named Cesar Chavez in 1962. Most advancement in farm workers’ rights has been instituted through direct action.

**Eastern Coachella Valley living conditions today**

The immigration reform debate is bringing more attention than ever to the people coming to this country to live and work. Even while working in essential industries, many immigrants live somewhat invisible lives.

That’s certainly true for the 15,000 or more farmworkers in the eastern Coachella Valley, an agricultural region east of Palm Springs. Here the land is rich, but most of the people are not, and mobile home parks make up a significant amount of housing for the area’s workers.

In this region there are hundreds of unauthorized mobile home parks with substandard electrical systems that cause major fires, and half-century-old mobile homes that leak wind and rain, sewage problems and more.

**Policy recommendations**

- Pay workers a livable wage.
- Create more safe, affordable housing for the residents.
- Ensure safe working conditions for farm workers.
- Provide access to preventive health care for workers and their families.
- Isolate environmental hazards from residents by creating a buffer zone of at least 2 miles from the nearest receptor.

**Web resources**

- [http://www.ufw.org/_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/03.html](http://www.ufw.org/_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/03.html)
- [http://www.californiareport.org/archive/R201305031630/d](http://www.californiareport.org/archive/R201305031630/d)

**References**

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