

Grieving Kettleman City mothers tackle a toxic waste dump

Each had miscarried or given birth to a child with birth defects. Their pain gave them strength to fight for justice.

By Louis Sahagun, staff writer

L.A. Times, Tuesday, March 30, 2010

Reporting from Kettleman City, Calif. - On a rainy afternoon in a cramped trailer, the five homemakers listened as state officials with clipboards asked personal questions: Did they or their husbands smoke, drink or take illicit drugs? Had they been exposed to pesticides or other toxic substances in the United States or Mexico? Do their families have histories of birth defects?

Each had miscarried a fetus or given birth to a child with severe birth defects within the last three years. Each suspected it had something to do with a nearby toxic waste facility.

"You want to know if we ever smoked cigarettes or took drugs," Maura Alatorre said bitterly. "But I'm telling you that if the dump is allowed to expand, we'll suffer more damage and illness. Why? Because we are poor and Hispanic. The people who issue those permits don't care about us getting sick from it because all they think about is money."

Magdalena Romero added, "Kettleman City to them is just a pigsty, but we are human beings, and we have rights."

Kevin Reilly, chief deputy director of the state Department of Public Health, smiled tensely. "This is only the start of a full investigation," he said, weighing his words. "But to be very honest, we may not be able to find answers for each of you."

A year ago, these four Mexican immigrants were shy, unquestioning. Not anymore. In less than a year, they have overcome their fears of government officials and placed this farmworker community, one of the poorest in the state, on a national stage.

Romero's daughter, America, who was born with a cleft palate and other serious health problems, died in 2007 when she was 4 1/2 months old. Alatorre's 2-year-old son, Emmanuel, is missing part of his brain and cannot keep his balance. Daria Hernandez's 1-year-old son, Ivan, has had two surgeries related to his cleft palate and other problems. Maria Saucedo's daughter Ashley died when she was 10 months old. A fifth woman, Lizbeth Canales, miscarried a fetus with heart problems and clubbed feet and hands.

"The first time I spoke out in public against the chemical dump, I felt so scared and embarrassed that my heart was pounding and I was shaking so hard I could barely speak," Romero recalled. "Today, I am a braver woman. . . . Once, our little pueblo felt lost and abandoned. In recent weeks, we have won great victories. We have a long way to go, but we will never tire."

Finding answers won't be easy. The Kings County community of 1,500 has for decades been surrounded by agricultural sewage, diesel exhaust, pesticides sprayed on adjacent fields and orchards, elevated levels of arsenic in drinking water and tons of dangerous substances hauled each day into the landfill 3 1/2 miles southwest of town.

Kettleman City is one of many small towns across the United States struggling with serious health problems that residents believe have environmental causes. Few get the answers they seek.

"In many of these communities, the number of cases is so small -- and in such small populations - - that the issues are not resolvable by statistical analysis," said Dr. Dean Baker, president of the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology and director of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at UC Irvine. "What I find fascinating about Kettleman City, however, is the confluence of events that has led to a massive response from state and federal authorities."

"It takes almost heroic people at the local level to make these things happen," Baker said.

Kettleman City, a municipality in name only, lies just off Interstate 5, equidistant from Los Angeles and San Francisco. It has no stop signs, sidewalks or street lights. The per capita income is about \$7,300 a year. Homes and trailers rent for from \$600 to \$800 a month, and many have broken windows, ripped screen doors and peeling paint.

Water runs brown as coffee from many household taps. Residents buy potable water at local vending machines for \$1.75 a gallon. The nearest supermarkets and pharmacies are about 15 miles away in Avenal.

Most residents work for low wages in the Central Valley's farms and orchards. It is unknown how many people here are undocumented immigrants, but the number is thought to be substantial. Only 225 people are registered to vote. Politicians rarely visit.

Local officials, however, frequently tour the landfill, where diesel big rigs from Southern California annually dump 400 tons of hazardous substances, including paint, acids and toys from China contaminated with lead.

Each year, the facility's owner, Waste Management Inc., pays \$3 million in taxes and disposal fees into the Kings County's general fund.

Waste Management officials said they welcome the state study. The landfill has been an integral part of the Kings County community for 28 years and is monitored, regulated and controlled by nearly a dozen local, state and federal agencies, owners note.

In those 28 years, the company has been fined more than \$2 million for infractions, including mishandling of carcinogenic polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs; failing to properly analyze incoming wastes, storm water and leachate for PCBs; and failing to properly calibrate equipment.

A year ago, the company applied for a county permit to expand. Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, a San Francisco environmental group long opposed to the landfill, conducted an informal health survey, turning up at least five cases of birth defects among 20 babies born between September 2007 and November 2008. Three of them had died.

"My daughter, America, was the first of the babies born with a cleft and other problems," Romero recalled in a tense, even voice.

"Until the day she was born, the doctor told me she was fine. She was 4 1/2 months old when she died. At first, I thought it was an act of God. Then I started hearing about the others."

It wasn't easy for them to go public. "I met with the moms individually," recalled Greenaction community organizer Ana Martinez. "They were anxious. Some cried. I said, 'This is a big fight against a terrible problem. We must get government agencies to understand. You can actually do something about that. We'd like to get all of you together.' "

The women eventually agreed. On Aug. 12, 2009, under the watchful eyes of Kings County Sheriff's Department deputies and police dogs, they waited their turn to address federal, state and local regulatory authorities at a community hearing in the Kettleman City Community Center.

When Saucedo's name was called, however, she broke down in tears. Romero went to the podium instead, so nervous she could hardly breathe.

"I, on behalf of all the parents here, ask that you help us, that you listen to us and that you don't continue permitting more expansions here," Romero said in a quavering voice. "Many children are being born with illnesses, many miscarriages are happening."

Bolstered by the experience, the women showed up at more than a dozen county hearings, where they held up enlarged color photographs of the babies' oral deformities. The photos became their calling cards at demonstrations and contentious Kings County hearings.

"Some people said we were crazy," Saucedo said, shaking her head in anger. "They said our babies' birth defects never happened, that we got our photographs off the Internet or that they were pictures of same baby taken from different angles."

Frustrations mounted over the county and state agencies' failure to act on the birth defects. All that changed when reporters began asking probing questions in late 2009. Yielding to pressure from the community, Kings County officials in December requested a door-to-door state investigation into health problems. State health officials rejected the request because, they said at the time, the situation did not warrant one.

On Dec. 22, the Kings County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the permit to expand the landfill.

Greenaction and a local group, the People for Clean Air and Water, sued county supervisors, saying they had not adequately addressed the project's effect on the community's health. Dozens of residents traveled by bus 200 miles to demonstrate on the steps of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency headquarters in San Francisco.

"Before we left for San Francisco my oldest daughter asked, 'Mom, why do we have to go to this thing?' " Romero recalled. "I said, 'It's for America, your sister in heaven. Get in the bus.' "

U.S. EPA regional administrator Jared Blumenfeld ordered his office to review its oversight activity involving the landfill and promised to go to Kettleman.

On Feb. 3, Romero awaited him on a lumpy gray couch facing the front door and a living room window with a 2-foot crack patched with silver duct tape. She was flanked by her children and clutched a large white photo album to her chest.

"The first thing I'm going to do is tell him that it is a great victory and honor to have him here in my home," she said. "I'm going offer him a glass of water -- bottled water. Then I'm going to show him these photographs of my daughter. I'm going to tell him that I'm not sure what happened to her, but I think it's the dump."

Soon after Blumenfeld left, a curious crowd pressed around the five women in the middle of the town's main drag, General Petroleum Street. Saucedo spoke first. "He promised to do all he can do to help," she told the gathered throng, including media from distant cities. "Personally, I won't be happy until that dump is moved to the other side of the world." Saucedo showed no trace of the fear that had driven her to tears some six months earlier.

Results of the state study will be released later this year. In the meantime, Romero, Alatorre, Hernandez, Saucedo and Canales grieve. They pray for guidance and strength at home altars adorned with candles, porcelain angels, renderings of Our Lady of Guadeloupe, and photographs of their babies.

Romero keeps a lock of America's hair in a small white envelope. Saucedo leaves red roses on Ashley's grave. Saucedo's husband has a tattoo of Ashley's disfigured face on his left arm.

"All we want is for someone to tell us what is going on with our babies," Maria Saucedo said.

**MID says 'yes' to wood for power
Vote starts environmental study of plan that aids utility, growers**

By John Holland, Modesto Bee
Also in the Sacramento Bee, Wed., March 31, 2010

A plant that would turn orchard wood into electricity won initial support Tuesday from the Modesto Irrigation District board.

Directors voted 5-0 to launch the state-required environmental study of the plant, which would be built in the Beard Industrial District in southeast Modesto.

The plant would burn wood removed from nut and fruit orchards during pruning or replacement of the trees.

It would provide a service to growers facing an end to open burning and supply the MID with a nearby source of renewable fuel.

The project would mean 20 to 25 jobs at the plant and about that many people working on contract to chip and truck the wood from the farms.

"That's the benefit — create local jobs, local tax base, local air quality benefits," said Robert Ellery, a partner in the project.

The plant, which could be running by 2012, would help the MID meet a state mandate to get 33 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2020.

The district stands at 12 percent today, almost all of it wind. The share is expected to rise to 25 percent with wind additions this year and next, then hit 33 percent with the wood-burning plant.

Ellery, owner of Bay City Boiler & Engineering Co. in Hayward, is planning the \$85 million project with Stephen Endsley, a real estate investor and retired cardiologist in Modesto. They hope to cover 30 percent of the cost with a federal grant.

The MID would buy the power over 25 years. The price has not been set, but district staff estimates that it will require a 4 percent rate increase.

The plant nonetheless would be worthwhile because it could run at any time, unlike wind turbines, which are subject to the breezes, said Greg Salyer, manager of resource planning and development for the MID.

He said the purchase contract would have a predictable price, unlike the fluctuating cost of natural gas, the main fuel for power generation.

For years, nut and fruit growers in the Northern San Joaquin Valley have torched their piles of waste wood. Air pollution concerns led to phasing out the practice between 2005 and this year.

Many growers chip the wood and let it decay into the soil. Experts say this practice is limited because the chips can get mixed in with newly harvested almonds and walnuts on the ground.

Gov. Schwarzenegger ordered the renewable energy standard to help curb emissions believed to be changing the global climate.

The proposed plant would help in part by burning wood, creating fewer carbon dioxide emissions than existing plants, supporters said.

Ellery said the plant would reduce the amount of wood left on orchard floors, where it releases methane, an especially potent climate-changing gas.

The plant would get an average of about 50 truckloads of chips a day, Ellery said. The volume would vary by season, increasing as trees are pruned in winter, he said.

Eric Reimer, a member of the Stanislaus Taxpayers Association, said the district needs to consider how much diesel fuel would be burned to chip and haul the wood.

Salyer said the California Energy Commission has factored that into its assessment of the value of biomass plants.

Also Tuesday, the board awarded an \$18.4 million contract for expansion of the gas-fueled power plant on Woodland Avenue to Haskell Corp. of Bellingham, Wash.

It will erect a structure housing \$35.9 million worth of generating equipment that the MID has bought for the 49.6-megawatt expansion.

[Tracy Press, Guest Commentary, Wednesday, March 31, 2010:](#)

His Voice: Could more power be something to sing about?

by Daniel Wells

I read with interest the headline story in the March 24 Tracy Press, with the full front-page image of Tracy Mayor Brent Ives depicted in front of the Tracy Peaker Plant, and the headline, "Power broker."

The story teaser indicates that the city will sell the 200-acre antenna farm on Schulte Road, in the adjacent parcel to the west of the peaker plant, to GWF Energy for a solar farm. A solar farm was an excellent idea for the use of the land that was proposed by opponents of using the land for a youth sports complex, and I was very pleased to read that this idea may in fact come to fruition.

However, delving into the article revealed more information regarding the relationship between the city and GWF Energy, particularly the city's March 3 letter to the energy commission supporting expansion of the peaker plant to a full-time operation. I guess we may have to drop the "peaker" designation.

The article indicates that the city's letter supporting the expansion touts the money given by GWF to local charities, in addition to construction job creation, and then mentions — in quotes — "environmental improvements," in that it will produce less smog per kilowatt-hour than the part-time plant now creates. The quotes are presumably due to the follow-up information that states that the expansion of the plant to a full-time operation will generate 53 times more smog overall that it does now.

So much for environmental improvements.

I will concur that GWF has been a good neighbor, at least subsequent to the decision to build the plant due west (and upwind) of our community — a decision which would be 53 times as unfortunate given what may now come to pass. But GWF has helped offset some of the increased pollution by the current plant, among its charitable contributions to local schools, organizations and individuals — I myself was among many who accepted its offer of a gas lawnmower trade-in for an electric model to help offset the increased pollution.

Since GWF's expansion of the plant would increase the pollution blown over and settling on our community by 53-fold, I would welcome a similar increase in the amount of charitable contributions and pollution offsets by GWF. I would also welcome Mayor Ives, all of the City Council members who voted in favor of the city's support of the expansion, as well as city manager Leon Churchill to join me in advocating for increased charitable contributions and pollution offsets by GWF.

Perhaps GWF could take a page from Tracy Chevrolet's playbook. It was announced at the truly outstanding Tracy Unified School District All-District Music performance — which I attended, in which my son participated Thursday evening, and in which my daughter will get to participate next year — that Tracy Chevrolet had donated \$12,000 to the district to cover the costs of this program for this year and next, saving it from being included in the district's massive budget cuts. Thank you, Tracy Chevrolet — you rock!

Tracy Unified Superintendent James Franco also stated during the event that our community is represented by more students than any other in the county at county school music

events. Ensuring the continuation of such a positive for our community and its children would be a wonderful opportunity for GWF to continue being that “good neighbor.”

To help offset the added pollution the initial peaker plant would generate, GWF donated a natural gas-burning school bus to Jefferson School District and one to New Jerusalem. As we are in need of additional transportation equipment, this would be another great opportunity for GWF to continue its efforts at being a good neighbor and assist local school districts with more such pollution offsets, which would directly and positively affect the health of our children, the community and the planet.

So what do you say, Mr. Mayor, City Council and Leon Churchill? Join me, won't you?

And what do you say, GWF? Please ensure your proposed expansion would help prevent and not accelerate the choking off of the sound of music from the Tracy triangle.

Daniel Wells is serving in the fourth year of his second term as a member of the Jefferson School District board of trustees and has been a long-time advocate for the continued funding of music education within Tracy schools.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Thursday, March 25, 2010:](#)

Asian air pollution floating aloft

By Mark Grossi

The latest science shows clouds of Asian pollution -- black carbon, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and other pollutants -- are being drawn into the stratosphere, about 20-25 miles above the Earth's surface.

They circle the globe for years, scientists say, perhaps affecting climate change in the coming years.

But the unanswered question: Does it come back down? And if it does, is it fouling the San Joaquin Valley?

Scientists don't know yet. But as Asia's economy continues to grow, could this kind of pollution become a factor in air quality here? Or is it already?

An international study, led by the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo., is being published today in Science Express.

For those who live in polluted air basins, such as the Valley, scientists only said some of it eventually descends into the lower atmosphere, while other parts of it break apart.