

Report: Valley health dangers put 1 million at risk

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

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More than 1 million people in the San Joaquin Valley are at high risk for illnesses and shortened lives because of dirty air, bad water, pesticides and their own poverty, UC Davis researchers said Monday.

Public health agencies must recognize the big connection among health problems, poverty and a toxic environment, according to a three-year study of cumulative health risks in the Valley.

Local agencies, regional and state officials and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency need to use the study to prioritize monitoring and community improvements, said environmental scientist Jonathan London, the main author of the study.

"This is not just another report highlighting the problems of the Valley," he said. "This is a call for action on the part of public agencies."

In the future, there should be highly focused government analysis of communities mentioned in the study, London said.

Many Latino communities were highlighted, including Kettleman City, the Kings County community near the largest toxic waste dump west of the Mississippi.

Kettleman residents report asthma, cancer, miscarriages, infant deaths and birth defects, including at least five with cleft palate between 2007 and 2010.

The Matheny Tract, a community next to the city of Tulare, is the site of a sewage treatment plant for the area, the study noted. Yet, residents are on septic systems, not connected to the plant. Residents also have chronic drinking-water contamination similar to many small Tulare County towns.

The Bee last month published a series of stories, called "Don't Drink the Water," on such widespread contamination and neglect of rural towns in the county and the rest of the Valley.

The UC Davis study, called "Land of Risk/Land of Opportunity," is the first in the Valley to link cumulative environmental hazards and poverty with health, researchers said.

Community advocates and academics in Fresno said the study pushes the issue into a bigger spotlight and gives public officials good reasons to take action.

John Capitman, executive director of the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at Fresno State, said the research underscores the idea that shortened life expectancy for many communities is not just a random occurrence in the Valley.

He said, "There's almost a 30-year difference in life expectancy at birth between the most-affluent communities and the least-affluent communities. This report provides an incredibly important perspective."

San Joaquin Valley residents face high environmental and social hazards

Central Valley Business News.com, Late Monday, Nov. 14, 2011

Half of the people who live and work in the San Joaquin Valley face elevated levels of air and water pollution coupled with poverty, limited education, language barriers, and racial and ethnic segregation, according to a three-year study by the University of California, Davis.

The study also found that residents of the region report more environmental hazards than are currently documented or addressed by state agencies.

"Our conclusion is that immediate and comprehensive action is needed by local, regional and state policymakers to protect the health and well-being of the region's most vulnerable residents," says study leader Jonathan London, director of the UC Davis Center for Regional Change and an assistant professor of human and community development.

The study was conducted in partnership with the San Joaquin Valley Cumulative Health Impact Project, a community-university partnership with environmental health and social justice organizations in the San Joaquin Valley.

The study uses a new measure developed by scholars on this project, but drawn from methods used by other researchers -- the Cumulative Environmental Vulnerability Assessment -- to identify the locations and populations within the San Joaquin Valley that are at greatest risk.

According to that measure, 51 percent of San Joaquin Valley residents experience high cumulative environmental vulnerability, with more than half of those experiencing acute cumulative vulnerability, UC Davis says.

Home to 4 million people, the San Joaquin Valley spans 300 miles through the center of the state. The region is a major transportation artery connecting northern and southern California and contains three of what the U.S. Department of Agriculture designates the nation's top-producing agricultural counties -- Fresno, Kern and Tulare.

The report found:

- The cumulative dangers were not evenly distributed across the region. Some of the communities facing the greatest levels of acute vulnerability include west Fresno, Monterey Park, Kettleman City, Matheny Tract, Earlimart and Wasco.
- Environmental and social vulnerability among at-risk populations persist, despite special attention from regulators and policymakers.
- Those with limited education and English fluency face difficulties advocating on their own behalf.

"With this report, we finally have the data that can lead to collaboration and action," says Kevin Hamilton, deputy chief of programs at Clinica Sierra Vista and a member of the San Joaquin Valley Cumulative Health Impact Project. "It's obvious to all that there are health and other disparities, but there's been a lack of data available to help communities, businesses and government collaborate to take next steps."

The report recommends that analysis of cumulative effects uncovered in the study be integrated into existing policy and planning frameworks in the region, and that special attention be focused on higher-risk areas.

"With one in two residents at elevated risk and one in three at extreme risk, now is the time to solve big problems by looking at the big picture. Without broad discussion and creative solutions, the San Joaquin Valley, especially its children, can't reach its full potential," says Sarah Sharpe, of Fresno Metro Ministry, who coordinates the San Joaquin Valley Cumulative Health Impacts Project.

The study was supported by funding from the Ford Foundation, the UC Davis John Muir Institute of the Environment, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Community Forestry and Environmental Resource Partnerships graduate fellowship.