



Why the EPA Is Important for Latino Families

Agency Regulates Harmful Pollution that Threatens Them

Jorge Madrid and Valeri Vasquez March 23, 2011

All air is not equal in the United States. Low-income and minority Americans tend to live and work in areas where they are disproportionately exposed to pollution that harms their health. Latinos are a particularly vulnerable population: Two-thirds of Latino families reside in areas that do not meet the federal government's air quality standards.

The Environmental Protection Agency has been a "thin green line" of defense between big polluters and public health since 1970. But that line is in danger of being erased. Conservative politicians are ignoring the desires of their home districts, and leading efforts to attack, defund, and in some cases even abolish the EPA.

GOP representatives are using the budget deficit as an excuse to go after the EPA. In a fiscal climate that forces government to cut spending they are choosing to keep subsidies for the fossil fuel industry and tax breaks for the rich, but slash measures that protect their constituents from polluted air and water.

Both environmental and public health organizations are reacting with strong opposition. Advocacy groups like Environment America have called the House measures "the largest assault on public health, clean air and clean water in years." Likewise, the American Lung Association warned that these attacks "ignore public health and will have dire consequences for all Americans." Last month, 4,500 doctors, health professionals, and scientists from all 50 states sent two separate letters to political leaders urging them to uphold the EPA and clean air protections.

But one crucial voice is still missing. An inordinate number of Latinos and their families will bear higher risks to both their health and their finances than the rest of the nation if these cuts pass. Latinos must speak up and reject attempts to put their communities in harm's way. They must demand a strong EPA that can protect them from polluters and help ensure clean air and water for future generations.

Latinos are at risk

Latino families are disproportionately exposed to some of the most dangerous environmental hazards—and often in their own backyards. Fully 66 percent of U.S. Latinos—25.6 million people—live in areas that do not meet the federal government’s safe air quality standards. This translates into shorter life spans: Latinos are three times as likely as whites to die from asthma. Latino children are also 60 percent more at risk than white children to have asthma attacks.

The following table illustrates the risks Latinos face where they live. Data are compiled from the American Lung Association’s report “State of the Air 2010.” The report details the 25 most polluted U.S. cities as measured by unsafe levels of particulate pollution and ozone. Center for American Progress analysis finds that 7 out of the 25 worst polluted U.S. cities have Latino populations over 40 percent. The average Latino population in the 10 worst polluted U.S. cities is 33 percent.

Latinos are also threatened where they work. Many are employed in predominantly outdoor professions including construction, landscaping, and certain service industries. There they are exposed to unsafe outdoor ozone levels and bad air quality that increase their risk for skin cancer and respiratory disease. The vast majority—nearly 88 percent—of our nation’s farm workers are Latino, and these employees and their families are regularly exposed to harmful pesticides in both the air and water. This chronic exposure leads to increased risks of cancer, birth defects, and neurological damage.

Such health disparities are only worsened by many Latinos’ lack of health care. They are the least likely to be insured compared to all other ethnic groups in this country. This kind of vulnerability can be devastating. Last year, 20 percent of uninsured adults used up all or most of their savings paying medical bills, and many uninsured families pay more than 10 percent of their total family income for out-of-pocket health care costs.

What this means is that Latinos stand a high chance of getting sick from pollution and being unable to afford treatment.

Latinos tend to live in cities with high pollution

The 25 most polluted cities in the country and their Latino populations, 2010

Metropolitan Areas	% Latino or Hispanic Origin
Bakersfield, CA	47.10%
Fresno-Madera, CA	48.70%
Pittsburgh-New Castle, PA	1.10%
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside, CA	44.40% (Riverside) 45.7%
Birmingham-Hoover-Cullman, AL	3.20%
Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Yuba City, CA-NV	18.90%
Salt Lake City-Ogden-Clearfield, UT	15.90%
Visalia-Porterville, CA	57.50%
Modesto, CA	39.60%
Hanford-Corcoran, CA	49.30%
Merced, CA	52.90%
Philadelphia-Camden-Vineland, PA-NJ-DE-MD	6.70%
Provo-Orem, UT	9.50%
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ	30.90%
Stockton, CA	37%
Chicago-Naperville-Michigan City, IL-IN-WI	19.90%
San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos, CA	30.90%
Washington-Baltimore-Northern Virginia, DC-MD-VA-WV	12.30%
New York-Newark-Bridgeport, NY-NJ-CT-PA	21.60%
Logan, UT-ID	9%
Eugene-Springfield, OR	6.40%
Harrisburg-Carlisle-Lebanon, PA	3.80%
San Jose-San Francisco-Oakland, CA	26.80%
Indianapolis-Anderson-Columbus, IN	4.90%
Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton, PA-NJ	11.30%

Source: American Lung Association (2011), US Census Bureau (2010 statistics)

The EPA helps keep families healthy

Since 1970 the EPA-led enforcement of clean air laws has prevented millions of asthma attacks and thousands of respiratory and cardiovascular-related hospital admissions by drastically reducing the amount of harmful chemicals in the air. The protections have even lowered rates of skin cancer. The agency's pollution limits have avoided an estimated 400,000 premature deaths in the last 20 years.

The EPA released its Second Prospective Study Report on March 1, 2011. The report evaluates the Clean Air Act's social and economic impacts from 1990 to 2020. It was peer reviewed by economists, scientists, and public health experts on the Council on Clean Air Compliance Analysis. The striking results show that in 2010 *alone* the Clean Air Act prevented over 13 million lost work days and 1.7 million asthma attacks. Americans were also spared 160,000 cases of premature death and 130,000 heart attacks—quite a record for only 365 days.

Further, the EPA estimates that the Clean Air Act will prevent 230,000 cases of early death and 17 million lost work days in 2020: a 44 percent and 31 percent increase, respectively, over the 2010 numbers.

The EPA's health benefits are most dramatic for children. The percentage of U.S. children with elevated levels of lead in their blood had dropped from 88 percent in the 1970s to 4.4 percent by 1995 according to data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. EPA analysis shows that the first 20 years of clean air programs prevented 10.4 million lost IQ points in children—mostly as a result of reducing lead in gasoline—and avoided 18 million child respiratory illnesses. Earlier this month, the EPA continued this good work by proposing the first limits ever on particle pollution from power plants. The new rules establish standards to protect Americans from mercury, acid gases, and the other toxics that spew from these plants, preventing 91 percent of the dangerous mercury in coal from reaching the air we breathe.

Radiation detection, too, falls in under the EPA's jurisdiction. The tragic events in Japan on March 12 reminded the world that the energy sources we rely on can spell an especially horrifying brand of toxic disaster. Through its monitoring efforts in California, the EPA is protecting Latino families and millions of others from the threat of nuclear radiation.

Clean air regulation also helps grow the economy

Conservatives have re-spun the same attacks on the EPA and its clean air laws for more than 40 years. These tired and debunked arguments claim that enforcing clean air laws is a job killer that is bad for industry and certain to ruin the economy. But the truth is that clean air laws produce very real and measurable results that both grow the economy and create jobs.

Clean air program benefits are projected to total \$110 billion in 2010 alone. EPA director Lisa Jackson announced recently that the “total benefits of the Clean Air Act amount to 40 times the cost of regulation.”

Put another way, the United States gets back \$40 in economic benefits for every \$1 it spends on regulation. This includes dramatically increased worker productivity—the agency’s regulation has prevented 4.1 million lost work days since 1970—and 31 million days Americans didn’t have to restrict activity due to air-pollution-related illness.

A single lost day of productivity can be critical for many Latino workers. This is especially true for those who are self-employed or work in the informal economy without paid sick days.

The current recession reinforces this point. Latino unemployment has risen dramatically to nearly 14 percent. Construction unemployment now looms above 20 percent. Latinos historically work in this industry, and they build wealth and gain access to the middle class through it.

A new report by Ceres and the PERI Institute at the University of Massachusetts finds robust economic benefits from EPA clean air rules. This runs contrary to conservative claims that EPA regulations destroy jobs. The report projects that clean air investment and regulation will create 1.46 million jobs over the next five years in a wide array of skilled and high-paying installation, construction, and professional positions.

Polls show all Americans demand clean air, especially Latinos

Recent polls show that Americans are not buying the conservative and big polluter arguments against the EPA. Latinos in particular display strong convictions to strengthen rules and regulations on dangerous greenhouse gasses and pollution—both of which the EPA regulates.

A 2010 poll conducted by the National Latino Coalition on Climate Change found that the overwhelming majority of Latino voters in Florida (76 percent) and Nevada (74 percent), and about two out of three voters in Colorado (64 percent), consider global warming very or somewhat serious. Greenhouse gases, which are linked as a harmful pollutant and the source of global warming, are also regulated by the EPA.

A similar poll by the Public Policy Institute of California found that 87 percent of Latino voters believe the government should regulate emissions. They are the most likely racial/ethnic group to express this view.

Finally, a 2010 poll by the University of Southern California found that 75 percent of Latinos said they worry a great deal about air pollution compared with only 31 percent of whites. And 85 percent of Latinos said they worry a great or a fair amount about soil and water contamination from toxic waste.

Latinos should support a strong EPA that protects their health

Latinos will pay the price for cuts to the EPA. They and their children will be exposed to elevated levels of risk and harm. Dirty air and water mean more visits to the emergency room, more missed days of work and school, and more cases of dangerous and expensive health issues.

Latino families should reject attempts to put their communities at risk. They should demand a strong EPA that can protect them from polluters and help ensure clean air and water for future generations.

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