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Valley legislators need to improve on environmental justice

By Guadalupe Martinez

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The San Joaquin Valley is on the frontlines of the environmental and climate crises in our state. Kern County, where I live, work and raised my family, is home to two major extractive industries: oil and agriculture. We have some of the worst air and water quality in the country, over 90% of the state's hydraulic fracturing, two of the state's three hazard waste landfills, and the highest pesticide use in the state. Fracking pumps and wastewater dumps are next door to houses and schools, and lay side by side with fields of crops.

Environmental hazards in the region take a significant toll on our health, with low-income communities of color bearing the heaviest burden. In Kern County, 290,000 residents live within one mile of an oil or gas well, and nearly 58% are people of color. Residents suffer from asthma, nausea, headaches, nosebleeds, cancers, respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses. Solving these health impacts requires not just knowledge of the issues, but an educated heart.

In Kern County and throughout California, we need leaders who acknowledge the disproportionate environmental and climate impacts suffered by the most vulnerable communities, and work in partnership with residents to advance solutions that will protect and benefit impacted communities.

The California Environmental Justice Alliance's [2015 Environmental Justice Scorecard](#) looks closely at how our legislators are voting on environmental policies that affect the people most impacted by environmental hazards — low-income communities and communities of color — and shows that it's time for new voices and politics in the San Joaquin Valley. I'm very disappointed that the average score of Valley legislators is 44%, which leaves a lot of room for improvement. I expect more from Democrats, especially Rudy Salas, who represents Kern County, but his new position as Chair of the Moderate Democratic Caucus is troubling.

The Scorecard includes a [map](#) that shows the overlap between environmental justice communities with legislative districts who advocated for the removal of an oil reduction provision in last year's SB 350. This provision would have directly benefited communities

in Kern County. Big Oil spent more than \$11 million to fight off the attempts to reduce our state's dependency on fossil fuels, and unfortunately many Moderate Democrats towed the industry line — including four Valley representatives: Rudy Salas, Henry Perea, Adam Grey, and Jim Cooper.

It is unacceptable for these legislators to hide behind concerns over equity and fail to take stands on measures that would improve the health and quality of life in the San Joaquin Valley. I am also troubled by the recent trend of Valley legislators — Michael Rubio and Henry Perea — leaving office before the end of their terms in order to work at big corporations.

People of color are the new majority in our state and legislators of color should be voting to advance the needs of communities of color. I want to see legislators from the Central Valley follow the lead of environmental justice champions like Assemblymember Susan Eggman of Stockton who are responsive to the needs of their constituents and work to advance real climate solutions like rooftop solar programs for low-income tenants. Assemblymember Eggman was the only San Joaquin Valley legislator who received 100% on the scorecard.

Communities throughout Kern County need health and quality of life improvements now. I'm ready to see legislators meeting this need by striving for better performance on environmental justice issues, and leading with educated hearts.

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