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María Hinojosa talks climate change in Sacramento



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SACRAMENTO

When there is talk about climate change, Latinos are a segment of the population that care a lot about the issue. In fact, climate change affects Latinos and other communities of color disproportionately compared to the general population.

Thirty percent of the countries Latinos reside in California — thus the importance of telling the stories from those who are directly feeling the impact of climate change is so important, said María Hinojosa, award-winning journalist and host of NPR's LatinoUSA.

“It’s time we begin to tell the narrative of our country, through our own eyes and our own experiences, but most importantly, in the way we want to narrate it,” said Hinojosa at a town hall in South Sacramento last week.

The radio host came to Sacramento to talk race, inequity and climate change. At the Fruitridge Community Collaborative, she moderated a panel

discussion with almond farmer, Tom Frantz, Guadalupe Martínez, assistant executive director of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment; Adrianna Quintero, founder and director of *Voces Verdes*; and Amy Vanderwarker, co-director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance.

The town hall began with a colorful theater performance directed by Marie Acosta of the Latino Center for Art and Culture. It's focus was on a young Latino male who was skeptical of climate change until he noticed the changes in his everyday life.

“We wanted to highlight the idea that so many people are almost oblivious to the subtle changes of climate change, but when they start to make the observations, they realize, climate change is real, and something should be done about it,” said Acosta.

Frantz, a fourth-generation almond farmer from Bakersfield said the impact of climate change on the agricultural industry has been alarming and apparent.

“We have shorter winters, less fog and less rain. We have different insects and different mosquitoes. Fifty years ago we never had problems with our groundwater and now, we are finding that more and more wells are going dry. My grandfather would never be able to recognize this kind of farming,” said Frantz.

Vanderwarker, who began her career trajectory as a college activist said her work has focused on the changing air quality in California and its impact on health.

“The changes in our environment are real. Most of my work centers on how the impacts of climate change affect peoples health and those most affected are working-class, immigrant, communities of color and Latinos,” said Vanderwarker.

Martínez, who once worked with the UFW and marched with César Chávez, migrated from his native Texas to California in the 1960's as a farm worker. He and his wife participated in the grape boycotts in Canada and throughout the United States. Their mission was to get the farmers to

get rid of the fruit and vegetables and everything else they picked from pesticide use.

“There were so many injustices during that time against those who worked the fields. The women were adversely affected. We were marching and boycotting to get big agriculture to get rid of all the chemicals in the pesticides that they were using because of its harmful and detrimental affect on the human body. It wasn’t just hurting the crops because they were going to be for consumption, but also our health,” said Martínez.

Those that complained about working conditions, or the chemicals in the pesticides, were threatened to be sent back to México, especially if they did not have immigration status.

But, it wasn’t just the pesticides that farm workers complained about. There were other issues that needed to be addressed, he said.

“Farm workers were dying in the Central Valley heat, there was water contamination in the fields, and the pesticide use ended up affecting our air quality. We have made some long strides in helping make the lives of farm workers better, but we have a long way to go, because those problems still persist,” said Martínez.

Quintero, who was born in California and raised in her parent’s native land of Colombia, noticed the harmful affects of corporate greed in the rivers and streams of the neighboring Bogotá River.

“I remember looking at the river as a teenager and seeing how contaminated it was. It was filled with foam and these awful smells and I noticed it was a dumping ground for all these companies and factories around it and there were no rules to not allow that to happen,” said Quintero.

“I would see 8-year-olds playing in the river and I always wanted to tell them to get out and not play in all of that dirty water. Since then, this connection to our environment and safety stayed with me and as I grew older, I saw this was common throughout Latin America.”

Hinojosa, who has spent her career talking about the important issues impacting the Latino community reiterated an alarming statistic about California.

“Sacramento is one of the top ten metropolitan areas in the United States that is the most ozone-polluted. In fact, five out of those ten metropolitan cities are found in California. Worst of all, Latinos have a 1/3 chance of living in pollution zones compared to 1/14 of whites,” said Hinojosa.

According to Hinojosa, climate change is a result of our carbon footprint.

Corporations in the United States and abroad coupled with the high use of vehicles that produce greenhouse emissions, the infrastructure in California, the lack of public transit, among other factors have all helped contribute to the growing and pressing issue of climate change.

In California, those living in rural communities are the most affected due to issues of poverty and immigration status. As a result, their health is also being impacted. In unincorporated communities, where the majority of residents are farm workers earning less than \$11,000 a year, the impact of climate change can be worse.

An example: California’s drought.

“Our summers are hotter and our winters are colder. We have seen little rain. The levels of water in our wells has gone down while a higher concentration of contaminants in the water has increased like nitrate and arsenic. We have families living in poverty having to spend hundreds of dollars on bottled water,” said Martínez.

The impacts of climate change are subtle but can be seen everywhere, said Quintero. The reason for rising food costs, the rising electricity bills, the ongoing and persistent drought, the reason for less parks, worse air quality, and a rise in asthma among children are all a direct result of climate change.

“The impacts are everywhere but there is this mentality that it’s invisible because we are choosing not to look. We are programmed not to look at something unless it gets catastrophic and by that point, its too late to do anything. Climate change is not a Hollywood blockbuster,” said Quintero.

Frantz said Kern County currently has the worst air quality in the country and despite California's progressive agenda to combat climate change, many of the policies that have been set in place to combat climate change are rarely felt in communities that are most affected.

"Cap-and-trade funds are causing the most disparities. There are all these laws that were put in place to help those from the most disadvantaged communities, but rarely do we see that money actually getting to these communities. In the end, we are not seeing real reductions of greenhouse emissions because these communities continue to suffer," said Frantz.

Solutions for climate change are many, said all members of the panel, and it all comes down to voting and making changes in the personal lives of everyone.

"We need to vote for people who see the reality of climate change and actually enact policies that work," said Frantz.

The reason climate change is invisible to many in Congress is because of upbringing and experience, said Quintero.

"When you have people who have been privileged and have never had to deal with groundwater pollution or have had to sit through hours of traffic, then these things are invisible to them. So, if they end up in elected office, what makes anyone think they would advocate for those issues?" said Quintero.

For Hinojosa, it is important solutions meet the needs of everyone, not just the most or least affected.

"We have to remember that we don't have an endless supply of things. We can't take for granted our natural resources and we can't continue to live the way that we do without realizing that we are hurting our planet. If we want to live in a better world, we all have an obligation to address climate change," said Hinojosa.