

Legislators must champion community health

Noemi Tungui, Special to The Star

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When I was 3 years old, my family migrated to the United States from Mexico. Oxnard became my second home where my siblings and I grew up.

My dad worked in the fields and in construction, and my mother worked in agricultural factories. I was part of the Migrant Program at Rio Mesa High School, which is nestled between vast strawberry fields.

I have never lost my admiration for the agricultural community I grew up in. Our land is not just a source of beauty, but also of pride. However, I have started to see the land here in Oxnard differently, being treated by dirty corporations as a dumping ground for pollution in the region.

I have watched as the negative impacts from the overuse of pesticides and other area pollutants plague my family members who work in the fields. The beauty of our beaches have also suffered with Oxnard having more coastal power plants than any other city in the state, and residents are currently fighting the proposal for a fourth.

Some neighborhoods in Oxnard have asthma rates higher than 90 percent of California due to the concentration of pollution sources. Recent research has shown that half of our state's natural gas power plants are located in disadvantaged communities.

Why must communities like Oxnard continue to bear the burden and pay the costs with our health?

Natural gas power plants are known to spew a half-million pounds of carbon a year and also emit large quantities of methane. California must meet our goal of 50 percent clean energy by 2030, but more dirty natural gas plants are not the path to get there. Natural gas is not a bridge to anywhere; it's just another dead-end fossil fuel that is polluting our communities and the environment.

People in Oxnard are dying from the overuse of pesticides, and from the overwhelming pollution created by multiple oil wells and power plants in our area. I

stand in disbelief as our migrant community — the backbone of California's food system — continues to face neglect and preventable disease caused by pollution.

About a month ago, I went to Sacramento to testify before the California Energy Commission (CEC) against the proposed Puente Power Plant in Oxnard. I spoke on behalf of my friends, family and community who will continue to be poisoned if another polluter is permitted in our backyard.

A few days after the hearing, I learned the CEC approved a study by the California Independent System Operator to consider the feasibility of clean energy alternatives to the Puente Power Plant. This was a win for my community of migrants, who often feel unheard and unseen in American politics.

But the fight is far from over. Such victories are only drops in a much larger bucket. The California Energy Commission and NRG Energy recently held a hearing at the Oxnard Performing Arts Center, where hundreds of environmentalists, advocates and community members joined together to give public testimony about the three-year battle against the power plant.

During my public comment, I invited community members to attend an educational forum Aug. 3 at the Ocean View School District to learn about another proposed polluting project — the expansion of the Cabrillo Oil and Gas Well Facility, which is walking distance from Oxnard homes and nestled in lettuce fields.

It is essential for community members to attend forums and be part of these conversations. People power is how victories are made in our communities; victories that serve as an example of the direction we need all our leaders to follow. Together we can build the clean-energy future we need for Oxnard and other communities that urgently need clean air.

Now more than ever, California needs to get its energy priorities right. Our state could soon set a 100 percent clean-energy goal, and building another dirty power plant is not the way to achieve it.

I urge my Assembly representative, Jacqui Irwin, to be bolder, to protect vulnerable communities like Oxnard, and to be the champion we need by standing strong for local air-quality improvements.

Noemi Tungui is an Oxnard resident who recently completed a congressional internship in Washington, D.C., and is currently working with Food and Water Watch, Ventura County.