

ORGANIZING BRINGS A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

A COMMUNITY SUCCESS STORY

by Carla M. Pérez

Contra Costa County is home to a diverse set of cities, some with stretches of open space and regional park land. Contra Costa is also the second most industrialized county in California, with five oil refineries dotting the west coast of the county, including the largest refinery on the west coast of North America. Refineries are inherently toxic operations: turning crude petroleum into highly refined and lucrative products such as gasoline, jet fuel, diesel, and industrial oils requires highly intensive processing to remove and dispose of tons of toxic contaminants. This toxic waste inevitably ends up in the Bay waters, in the air surrounding refining facilities, and in the lungs of nearby residents.

While refineries contribute to local pollution in myriad ways, one of the largest sources is refinery flaring. West County residents near refineries consistently experience breathing problems, eye irritation, nausea, and asthma attacks after flare events occur at nearby refineries. As a result, in the mid 1980s, Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) began scientific and legal investigations of these flare emissions.

The CBE work investigating flare-related emissions was considerably strengthened in the 1990's when it was coupled with a then-emerging grassroots organizing strategy. Working with local leaders such as Ethel Dotson, Dr. Henry Clark, Barbara Parker, and Mary "Peace" Head, CBE organizers knocked on doors in the neighborhoods closest to the Chevron refinery to ask neighbors about

their experiences with health problems and their concerns about flaring events at the refinery. Resident leaders hosted house meetings where neighbors discussed their common experiences and concerns, and CBE staff shared information about the chemicals that were released during flaring episodes, their potential health effects, and the ways that these chemicals, and flaring as a whole, were regulated (or not regulated). Over meals in the homes of their neighbors, concerned residents recognized that one way to reduce the possible health risks from refinery flaring was to demand that the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (Air District) require refineries to do more to prevent flares.

The first breakthrough for this emerging community campaign came in 2001 when the Air District agreed to a community demand to complete a rigorous study of flares and their local impacts. This study found that flare emissions were 200 times higher than the Air District had previously thought. The campaign made another breakthrough the same year, when CBE successfully filed a lawsuit against the Air District forcing the agency to improve their regulation of the refineries. Although this marked a victory for the campaign, CBE members had a new, larger goal: to get the Air District to pass a strong flare control rule.

CBE staff and resident leaders began increasing their organizing efforts and expanded their reach to Rodeo and Crockett, also low-income communities of color in Contra Costa County hosting major

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refineries. Community leaders attending house meetings each committed to bringing one of their neighbors to the next meeting. The belief that their neighborhoods deserved to be healthy and to be protected from needless risks resonated strongly among families in Richmond neighborhoods like Parchester Village and Liberty Village. CBE, with the help of the Pacific Institute, also held a series of workshops to help residents understand the flare emissions data and the range of potential solutions, such as pollution control equipment and adjustments in refinery operations. In addition, the organization and its members forged a strong and crucial alliance with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Steamfitters, and Pipefitters Local 302, whose members are contracted to work at refineries and are often on the front lines of risk caused by accidents and routine air pollution emissions at refineries.

It was an exciting time for people who had been looking for a way to address refinery flaring for so long. Members were buzzing with feelings of empowerment and hope. And in the midst of this momentum, the community was reminded why this campaign was so important. In July 2002, a huge flare event took place at the Conoco-Philips refinery in Rodeo, which shares a chain-link fence with a low-income housing project. The incident released nearly 250 tons of pollution in a huge cloud of smoke and fire. Local CBE members immediately reported shortness of breath, skin rashes, nausea, and migraine headaches.

Organized and vocal community members increased pressure on the Air District, paying

visits to Air District board members and giving compelling testimony at Air District board meetings. Finally, in 2003, the first victory for the flare rule was announced when the Air District required refineries to monitor and report on the volume and content of flare gases. Soon after the adoption of this regulation, one refinery cut its flaring by 80-90 percent. After two more years of organizing, on July 20, 2005, the Air District approved a Flare Control Rule that prohibits routine dumping of refinery gases through flaring—a first regulation of its kind in the country.

By combining grassroots organizing and leadership development with legal advocacy and scientific research, organized community residents were able to force a 50% reduction in flaring at Bay Area refineries. While this is an incredible victory, equally important was the victory of organizing itself. In the process of building the campaign, organizing their neighbors, building alliances with labor, and taking collective action, community members were empowered with knowledge to build a community network and strengthen their voice and their power as a people.



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