

Summary of Yakima Community Conversation

On November 13, 2019, the Yakima NAACP Chapter hosted a community conversation on environmental justice at Yakima's Henry Beauchamp Community Center. Meeting participants were largely recruited by the NAACP, Nuestra Casa, and the Community Health Workers for Migrants and Refugees Coalition. Participants shared their lived experience on the multiple threats in Yakima to a healthy environment. The agricultural industry was identified as a key area of concern. Its water pollution and poor pesticide management causes significant harm to health. It was noted that farmworkers and their families live in an environment of fear due to the anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions of the federal Administration. This fear has made some farmworkers less willing to speak out against mistreatment.

Farm worker safety concerns

Unsafe working conditions on agricultural farms exist due to poor monitoring and gaps in communication between farmworkers and State agency staff. Concerns were expressed about the State's Agricultural and H2A Workforce Advisory Committee holding too infrequent and inaccessible meetings to be helpful.

Agency oversight and community well-being concerns

Agency environmental enforcement, education, and outreach needs improvement. Examples were given of hop and cattle farmers not being held accountable for environmental violations. Cow effluent enters waterways and contributes to medical conditions like Blue Baby Syndrome in newborns whose mothers drink contaminated water. Farmers also dumped their dead cattle in landfills after they froze to death during a recent winter freeze. There was also unease about the availability of public drinking water for low-income households as wells became dry.

The way government agency staff interact with industry representatives and the general public was seen as a concern. At most public hearings on rulemakings, lobbyists exercise outside influence due to having the resources. An example was also provided of the Yakima Regional Clean Air Agency not taking its work seriously to educate local residents of burn permits they needed.

Solutions

Numerous ideas were expressed about how the State government could improve its operations to improve health equity. They included:

Outreach:

- People want to be engaged by their government. Government needs to be proactive and creative in reaching them.
- State agency staff should conduct more direct outreach to farmworkers so they're more comfortable reporting violations by their employers.

Outreach continued...

- Important information should be communicated in Spanish language print and radio, and public meetings should be held at convenient times for farmworkers with translation services available.
- Government can work with trusted community partners in Yakima that represent people of color and low-income communities such as the Opportunities Industrialization Center of Yakima, La Casa Hogar, and the local NAACP Chapter.

Coordination

- Environmental issues that are multi-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral would benefit from greater cohesion among the State and Local governments and entities in the private and non-profit sectors.

Resources

- Part of the problem is that agencies like Labor & Industries don't have enough staff to conduct sufficient oversight. Government programs to protect people from substandard housing were also underfunded. An accountability fee on corporations to fund such efforts could help State agencies improve health quality in the community.

Oversight and Standards

- The State should conduct effective quality assurance checks of farms to make sure violations are identified and followed up on.
- Worker training and orientation standards should be mandatorily established.

Assessment tools

- The quality of housing, air, water, and soil, for a community were suggested as a way to identify whether it was at risk.
- Signs that a community is making progress in better health outcomes include the existence of air pollution monitors, quality sidewalks, solar energy use, zoning data for home buyers, and high voter participation rates.
- Government should also have established tools to assess health threats and a process and strategy to address them.

Mapping

- Indicators that were recommended to be added to the IBL mapping tool include the location of dams and fish populations, pesticides, agricultural runoff, water quality in shallow wells, and nuclear waste.