

USING OUR POWER

Communities Confronting Toxins in the Bay Area

Five hundred years ago, we believed the sun circled around the earth and that the earth was at the center of the universe. The astronomer Copernicus challenged this hypothesis. The earth is not the center. In fact, it circles around something even larger — the sun. For the last two hundred years, we have placed the economy at the center of our universe. Land, air, and water have been used as industry and society needed, and, if we exhausted any resource, we assumed we could invent a new technology to meet our future needs.

These assumptions about how we use the earth's resources are impacting the interlocking relationship between human health and our environment in ways that are not sustainable. Shrinking forests, toxic ground water, and rising temperatures are the extension of a misguided understanding. And the stakes are higher than we can fully absorb. We risk destroying the intricate system that supports our life. We are only now uncovering links between the chemicals we introduce into the environment and cancer, asthma, developmental disabilities, and a host of other illnesses. We need a shift of the same magnitude as the one Copernicus made — a shift to assign human well-being and the environment a central place around which industrial and commercial activity can circle.¹

Using Our Power: Communities Confronting Toxins in the Bay Area points to signs supporting a paradigm shift. Courageous individuals, organizations and government agencies are exposing our impact on the San Francisco Bay environment and our communities. This report highlights three of these efforts.

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OUR LEGACY

San Francisco grew from mining. With the first cry of “Gold!” in the hills, steamships from the East landed in the city, and it boomed. The forests were cleared to make room for the mines and the Sacramento and Guadalupe rivers were transformed by the sifters’ obsession. Mercury was used to separate gold from ore, then dumped into the rivers that flow into the San Francisco Bay. Seven generations later, we eat fish from the water still contaminated by that mercury; one of the most hazardous of all chemicals.²

Today, the nine counties around the San Francisco Bay comprise a dense sprawl of seven million people.³ The region grew by 13% from the 1980s to the 1990s, when thousands of high-tech workers arrived from around the world to seek their fortunes in the dot-com industry. The fruit orchards in the Valley of Heart’s Delight were replaced by Silicon Valley industrial parks. But the region’s high cost of living, brought on by inflated salaries, drove many to the surrounding communities. The highest housing costs in the nation have meant both rich and poor are driving longer distances to work in the Bay Area from as far away as Sacramento, Modesto, and Los Banos.

The region is just coming up for air following the dot-com gold rush. But we find that our air is not clean. The Bay Area has dangerously high levels of ozone and dust, soot and lead.⁴ The cars we drive, oil refineries, and power plants account for this problem.⁵ Residents — particularly children — suffer high rates of asthma as well as other respiratory illnesses.

The high-tech industry is not as clean as it was initially promoted to be. Computers demand tremendous energy for production as well as use. The “clean rooms” in which computer chips are prepared expose workers — mostly Asian women and Latinas — to chemicals that can compromise their reproductive health and endocrine balance.⁶ Computers are designed for obsolescence and are the fastest growing part of our waste stream, filling landfills with toxic lead and mercury as well as other hazardous substances.⁷ Santa Clara County, the birthplace of the high-tech industry, has more Superfund sites than anywhere in the nation. Twenty-four of its 29 Superfund sites were created by high-tech production.⁸

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Bay Area’s “once thriving ecosystem has lost much of its vigor — the result of human intervention in the form of pollution, urban sprawl, poor stewardship, and overcrowding.”⁹





Before the next gold rush emerges, we have an opportunity to reflect on the impact of economic growth on human health and the environment and to adjust our actions. Individuals, organizations, businesses, and governments in the San Francisco Bay Area are contributing to a paradigm shift — and in some cases, we are leading the rest of the country. California passed the first legislation in the nation to reduce pesticide use in schools,¹⁰ due in large part to the work of Bay Area organizations such as Californians for Pesticide Reform¹¹ and Pesticide Action Network North America.¹² Marin Breast Cancer Watch is developing a community-specific environmental database in response to the high rates of breast cancer there.¹³ The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition pressed industry leader Hewlett-Packard to start a computer recycling program.¹⁴ These organizations are part of a growing network that recognizes that what hurts the environment, hurts us all. And they are taking this moment to strategically, tenaciously, and creatively make changes by educating, organizing, and shaping policy.

IMPROVING THE REGION'S AIR QUALITY

The San Francisco Bay Area suffers from poor air quality. The haze we regularly see comes from the cars we drive as well as from industry. The U.S. Congress regulates six of the most toxic substances — carbon monoxide, lead, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, particulate matter, and sulfur dioxide — known to impact human health. For the past decade, many Bay Area cities have frequently exceeded federal air standards for ozone as well as particulate matter (dust, soot, and lead).¹⁵ Exposure to ozone can cause chest pain, coughs, and lung inflammation and may contribute to asthma and even death. There is no “safe” level of exposure to dust, soot, or lead.¹⁶

In one San Francisco neighborhood, community mothers are meeting together in homes to organize for better air quality in Bayview Hunters Point.



MOTHERS' ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND JUSTICE PROJECT

SITUATION: *The Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood is located in southeast San Francisco, encompassing seven square miles and housing about four percent, or 30,000, of the city's residents. The majority of Bayview Hunters Point residents are African American (62%), compared to just eight percent citywide, and 40% of its householders have an income below \$15,000.¹⁷*

Bayview Hunters Point is the site of a Pacific Gas & Electric power plant, one of the oldest and biggest sources of air pollution in San Francisco, located just 50 feet from homes and playgrounds.¹⁸ But PG&E is not the sole contributor to environmental problems here. A 1984 study conducted for the California Waste Management Board — which went on to serve as a guidebook for companies looking to locate their chemical plants, oil refineries, and landfills — recommended locating facilities in less “effectual” communities comprised of blue-collar workers and minorities, who are “not concerned with issues.”¹⁹ Bayview Hunters Point today holds 700 hazardous waste facilities and 325 underground petroleum storage tanks,²⁰ a block-long sewage treatment plant emitting noxious fumes while processing 80% of the city's waste,²¹ and two Superfund sites. One of these is the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, used for testing radiological materials including plutonium.²² In all, Bayview Hunters Point has four times more hazardous waste sites than the rest of the City.²³

“Probably every toxin known to man is out there, whether it's mercury, lead, radiation, or organic solvents. And all major chronic illness rates are higher in Hunters Point than in any other neighborhood,” says Dr. Kevin Grumbach of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of California—San Francisco, who has conducted research there.²⁴ Rates of cervical and breast cancer are double that in other parts of the Bay Area; hospitalization rates for asthma are three times the statewide average.²⁵ One in six children has asthma.²⁶ School absenteeism and learning disabilities are the least of the challenges affecting children with asthma. It is one of the main causes of death in children under five.²⁷

TAKING ACTION: *Mothers are leading the latest environmental health and justice actions in Bayview Hunters Point. Two of them, Marie Harrison and Tessie Ester, have lived and worked for 40 and 20 years respectively in the neighborhood. They know that unraveling the links between the environment and health is not easy. Harrison became so concerned about her grandsons' nosebleeds and asthma that, on a doctor's recommendation, she moved them out of the neighborhood and*

to Vallejo this past fall.²⁸ Not every family can pick up and move. Nor do most want to. But inspiring residents toward action is a challenge. Prior efforts to do so have not been as effective as they could be. Many researchers have studied the community, and large environmental organizations have tried mobilizing residents, but they move on when the grants end, leaving residents cynical about outside help. Says Harrison, “Bayview Hunters Point is an infected cut which needs to be healed from the inside, not by a Band-Aid applied from the outside.”

Now, Harrison and Ester are organizing the Bayview Hunters Point Mothers’ Environmental Health and Justice Project to take control of their own — and their children’s — futures. **Mothers are researching the health impacts of environmental exposure and developing a plan to address the issues that they identify.** Organizers recognize that environmental health threats compete with other demands: the need for work, the prevalence of violence, and fears for their children’s future as schools lose funding. Organizers know that they must engage community members on a personal basis, so they meet in one another’s homes. One mother will invite three or four of her friends, and while children color in the adjoining room, the mothers review maps of toxic hotspots and locate their homes with poster pins. They voice concerns about black mildew, babies eating lead paint on the ground, and the fire from the shipyard that burns across the fence.

SUCCESS: Harrison is not afraid of a fight. In June 2003, she — along with other mothers and representatives from environmental justice organizations — filed complaints with the U.S. Department of Energy that PG&E has violated Title VI of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964²⁹ through discriminatory actions, policies, and practices.³⁰ They demand the immediate closure of the outdated and polluting power plant. Says Harrison, “**This battle isn’t just for a space on the bus; it’s a fight for our basic human rights to live, work, worship, and play in a community free from toxic soup.**”³¹

Harrison is strategic. She recognizes that sufficient electricity generation is a critical issue for the greater Bay Area. She realizes that PG&E has to keep going in order to pay the community for damages, even if the Hunters Point Plant is closed down. The recent energy crisis may make this a good time to demonstrate the feasibility of true alternatives. She is putting pressure on PG&E to innovate and has aligned herself with Greenaction and the Community Energy Coalition to promote green energy. Harrison also knows it is time to teach the rest of the Bay Area that “each time people conserve, they are saving someone’s breath.”

For more information:

Green Action <www.greenaction.org>

Community Energy Coalition <www.sfpower.org>

REDUCING TOXIC CHEMICALS

Toxic chemicals are a real concern for Bay Area residents. The places we work, study, live, and play, the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the foods we eat contain an increasing number of chemicals. Since World War II, tens of thousands of synthetic chemicals have been introduced into the environment.³² Many of them have improved our lives through medicine, technology, and manufacturing. Yet our bodies absorb these chemicals, store them, and pass them on to our children. Cancer and learning and development disabilities are increasingly common. Evidence is mounting linking these diseases to chemical toxins in the environment.³³

Infants and children are particularly vulnerable to chemicals. They are exposed to pesticides routinely sprayed in schools to control ants. They crawl on carpets sprayed with cleaners containing pesticides and run on chemically-treated grass. In proportion to their size, they absorb more air and water than adults and thus have a greater level of exposure. Scientists are growing concerned about the impact of pesticides, mercury, and lead on children, as these substances are increasingly linked to neurodevelopment disabilities and cognitive disorders.³⁴

Of the 85,000 synthetic chemicals introduced into our environment in the past 50 years, fewer than 10% have actually been tested for their effects on human health.³⁵ Only 12 have been tested for their effects on the developing brain.³⁶

A unique partnership is forming between residents and physicians in one Bay Area community to educate school employees and health professionals about the risks of children’s exposure to pesticides and how to reduce it. “**Preventing pesticide use is a direct way in which parents can take control of certain parts of their lives, and change conditions affecting their children,**” says Andria Ventura of Clean Water Fund.





RICHMOND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PARTNERSHIP

SITUATION: Richmond is located in the northeast portion of the San Francisco Bay Area, in Contra Costa County, and is one of the poorest cities in the state.³⁷ Richmond is ethnically diverse with the majority (87%) of its nearly 100,000 residents people of color.³⁸ Fifty-two percent of Richmond's residents live below the poverty line.³⁹

Richmond is surrounded by over 350 industrial facilities, including oil refineries, incinerators, and pesticide manufacturers.⁴⁰ Each year, Richmond's industries generate 800,000 pounds of toxic air contaminants, 18,000 pounds of toxic pollutants in wastewater, and 179,000 tons of hazardous waste.⁴¹ The Chevron Texaco Corporation is Richmond's biggest industry,⁴² and it alone stores over 11 million pounds of toxic, explosive, and corrosive chemicals. Thirty-five major industrial accidents have occurred since 1989. For these reasons, Contra Costa County is one of the most dangerous places to live in the nation.⁴³

African American workers were drawn to Richmond's shipyards from the South during the closing years of World War II.⁴⁴ Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Latinos are now moving into the area at lightning speed. Contra Costa County grew by 18% in the 1990s, a rate five percent higher than that of the rest of the region, and its biggest town, Richmond, is one of the few affordable places left to live.⁴⁵

Like many cities in the region affected by toxins, raising children safely is a challenge. One way in which parents can make a difference is by reducing chemical use in the schools.

TAKING ACTION: In early 2002, the West Contra County Unified School District — covering the City of Richmond's schools — adopted an integrated pesticide management (IPM) plan out of concern for children's learning and development. They believed that schools should be the safest places in the community and advocated for schools to promote safer alternatives.

Pesticides are routinely applied in schools to manage pests or to control weeds — even if they are not needed. The new IPM plan changes that habit to one of “better safe than sorry.” It not only requires that schools notify parents and personnel of chemicals used, but it also prohibits use of the most toxic pesticides and requires that the school give purchasing preference to the least toxic treatments available.⁴⁶ A cornerstone of the plan involves an IPM

committee to approve the products used in the school district and to educate the community about the new policy.

Implementing this new plan requires broad support. In early 2003, the West County Toxics Coalition sought out scientific expertise for the community. They partnered with Physicians for Social Responsibility to teach Richmond's health professionals — particularly its pediatricians and family practitioners — how pesticide exposure can be linked to certain learning and behavior problems in children. The local chapter of Clean Water Fund is targeting school professionals and community members using a similar curriculum. These groups have formed the Richmond Environmental Health Partnership⁴⁷ to leverage their skills towards educating the community and protecting children.

But change is not easy. First, it is difficult to get people to stop using familiar chemicals. This is why district personnel and parents need to learn about the health effects of pesticides on children. Second, while the School District has passed an IPM policy requiring schools to change, they cannot control pesticide drift from neighboring businesses. For instance, community members are concerned about pesticides from a corporate nursery spilling over onto the adjacent Verde Elementary schoolyard. Pesticide drift is reason for concern, as even at low levels pesticides can contribute to chronic diseases and developmental disabilities. **Parents, teachers, and physicians unaware of exposure may not associate health problems with low-level pesticide use.**⁴⁸ Children are especially vulnerable, and those that play in the schoolyard next door to the spraying are most at risk.

The partnership hopes to motivate health professionals and local citizens to advocate for community health changes first by joining the School District's IPM committee. The next level of organizing is to focus on the sources of pollution and opportunities for action. **“The community has a right to know about pesticides, and then we need to build a community groundswell to reduce risk,” says Henry Clark of West County Toxics Coalition.** The participation of Physicians for Social Responsibility is critical to their efforts. Clark emphasizes, “Health professionals across the country need to become more aware of the link between environmental pollution and illnesses.”

For more information:

Clean Water Fund <www.cleanwaterfund.org>

Physicians for Social Responsibility <www.sfbaypsr.org>

West County Toxics Coalition

<www.westcountytoxicscoalition.org>

TAKING PRECAUTION

Groups in Bayview Hunters Point and Richmond offer important examples of how communities can address air pollution and chemical exposure through organizing and education. What else can we do beyond the neighborhood and community level? Adopting the Precautionary Principle as public policy is one possibility.

The Precautionary Principle is a guide for preventing harm to human health and the environment that can translate to public policy.⁴⁹ It was developed with the idea that policy makers should use caution in making decisions about public health *before* exposure and potential harm occurs. According to this Principle, *some* credible evidence that illness may be caused by air pollution or synthetic chemical exposure — as opposed

to *conclusive* proof of a direct link — should be sufficient to trigger protective and regulatory action by governments. Additionally, the cost of proving harm or safety needs to shift from the impacted community or individual to producers.

Changing technology to prevent harm may increase costs to industry in the short run. However, the costs may not be as great as industry might suggest.⁵⁰ Changing technology will stimulate innovation, as businesses do not always invent the safest or most efficient systems or products without regulation.⁵¹ If full-cost accounting were used and all of the human health and environmental costs of production — from extraction to disposal — were tallied, current practices would actually be shown to be much more costly than following the Precautionary Principle.⁵²



M A K I N G P O L I C Y C H A N G E

THE BAY AREA WORKING GROUP ON THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

SITUATION: *Who holds the burden of proof that PG&E's toxic emissions are hurting Bayview Hunters Point residents? While the Clean Air Act identifies 189 "hazardous" air pollutants, there are no standards for how much of any of these pollutants is allowed in the air. As a result, it is difficult to assess whether air quality is "good" with regard to concentration of these hazardous air pollutants. In addition, there is only one air monitoring station for the entire City and County of San Francisco, which is not sufficient to determine whether the level of air pollution in the Bayview Hunters Point area may differ from that, for example, in the Marina.*⁵³

Researchers are cautious about declaring the causal links between chemical exposure and human health. Regulatory agencies, awaiting conclusive proof of harm, do too little too late. However, with increasing numbers of chemicals in the environment, the burden of proof is costly, as there are literally thousands of chemicals to study. It is also increasingly complicated, since we do not know the health effects of combinations of multiple chemicals reacting with one another. Finally, it often takes decades to prove harm, as we have seen in the case of tobacco. The health costs of waiting for conclusive proof are no longer acceptable.

TAKING ACTION: *In 1999, a broad base of local and national organizations formed the Bay Area Working Group (BAWG) on the Precautionary Principle.⁵⁴ Health advocates joined with environmental justice organizations to come up with a*

common plan and strategically engage in community education for support of the Principle.

As both a city and a county, San Francisco offered a unique opportunity to have a multi-jurisdiction impact. Plus, San Francisco already had a Department of the Environment in place which organizers could hold accountable for implementation of the policy.

SUCCESS: *In June 2003, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors adopted an Environmental Code with the Precautionary Principle as its guiding theme. "This is a stunning and unprecedented breakthrough in the management of environmental matters in the U.S."⁵⁵ San Francisco is the first municipality in the country to adopt the Precautionary Principle in municipal law. It will serve as a model to others in how the ordinance is implemented.*

The San Francisco Environmental Code mandates that government take preventive action regarding public health. *It supports and underscores the public's right to know about toxins and shifts the burden of proof regarding health and safety to the producer. It expects that alternative products and processes will be assessed. It incorporates full-cost accounting into decision making. And, finally, it invites participation in regulatory decision making by impacted communities.*

Will the new ordinance make any difference? "Yes," says Jared Blumenfeld, who heads San Francisco's Department of the Environment. "The world cannot be 'risk-free,' but

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there are safer alternatives to the many toxic, carcinogenic, and environmentally destructive practices and products in use today.”⁵⁶

San Francisco will begin implementing the Principle through establishing purchasing policies as a first step.⁵⁷ The government will ask manufacturers to disclose the contents of their products, and if they do not pass the test for toxicity, San Francisco will not buy them. This is different from an approach that accepts the lowest bid, according to Debbie Raphael, San Francisco’s Toxic Reduction Program Manager.⁵⁸

While there is much interest and potential for replication in cities around the U.S., the BAWG is focusing on the greater Bay Area. They have moved on to the East Bay, hoping that both Berkeley and Oakland will adopt the Principle. But the political landscape across the Bay is different. Neither Berkeley nor Oakland has an Office of the Environment to help shepherd the Principle through their respective City Councils.⁵⁹ So promoters are mobilizing the community to build support.

The Precautionary Principle is a “useful policy tool and organizing principle, giving language to policy makers to push forward an agenda,” according to Urban Habitat’s Bhavna Shamasunder. “And people are using it, but there is no substitute for direct organizing and good education.”

For more information:

Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates
<<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/EnvirPol/organizations/bayview.html>>

Breast Cancer Action <www.bcaction.org>

Breast Cancer Fund <www.breastcancerfund.org>

Center for Environmental Health <www.cehca.org>

Clean Water Fund <www.cleanwaterfund.org>

Commonweal <www.commonweal.org>

Redefining Progress <www.rprogress.org>

Urban Habitat <www.urbanhabitat.org>

Women’s Cancer Resource Center <www.wcrc.org>



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<www.womensfoundca.org> produced this report. It was written by Rebecca Bauen. The Foundation is the first and largest women’s foundation in the West. Its *Initiatives Forum* is the West Coast’s first policy action fund for women and girls aiming to improve environmental conditions affecting women and their families where they live, work, and play. In addition to grantmaking, the Foundation hosts strategic gatherings to build new alliances between activist groups and other sectors of our society.

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- 58 The cost of the *process* of reviewing products requires that San Francisco hire technical experts with more scientific expertise than they have in-house. Yet, the actual *cost* of purchasing the least toxic alternative is no higher. This translates to about \$15-20,000 per year for technical advisors in addition to a dedicated staff person, according to Debbie Raphael in a phone interview with the author, 22 August 2003.
- 59 Berkeley is considering a resolution giving City staff a year to develop a strategy for implementation. Oakland's Health Commission has latched onto the strategy of protecting public health, rather than a strict environmental angle.

LESSONS LEARNED

We have much to learn from the examples highlighted in this report. Following are some of the lessons:

1. **More than one approach is needed.** Each of these

examples demonstrates that communities need to use a combination of strategies:

- *Educating and Organizing:* The Bayview Hunters Point project started by *educating* the mothers for action. This has taken them into the streets *organizing* against the PG&E plant and advocating for compensation through the Civil Rights Act.
- *Advocacy:* Community *advocacy* was necessary for the Integrated Pest Management plan to be implemented in Richmond's Schools. Recognizing that it will not solve all their problems, residents need to *organize* for a solution to pesticide drift they can live with.
- *Policy:* The Precautionary Principle was an idea that resonated with San Francisco *policy makers*. The Bay Area Working Group on the Precautionary Principle (BAWG) now needs to educate and organize East Bay communities to move the framework into policy.

2. **Promoting the Precautionary Principle may be done at various levels.** Some groups may embed it in their ongoing work, such as pesticide reduction; others may take it to their governments to adopt.

- *Policy makers* can use new language to promote a public health and environmental ethic. *Organizers* can help them to identify where they can have the most impact, such as new purchasing guidelines.
- *Diverse organizations* can collaborate for a common purpose, such as public health and environmental justice organizations joining together to form the BAWG.
- *Organized labor*, fearing job loss, challenged the Precautionary Principle before it went before the City of San Francisco. The BAWG met with the San Francisco Labor Council to identify mutual concerns and goals, and afterwards, labor came out in support of its passage.
- *Industry* is not uniformly opposed to the Precautionary Principle but needs to be educated about opportunities available such as new government incentives.

3. **Grassroots community organizations have a better chance of succeeding in solving environmental problems when they build partnerships with others.** Community organizations understand best the problems affecting them. Yet they often need more scientific and legal information to make their case for change.

- Impacted communities can better solve the extraordinarily complicated situations that they face by building alliances with research organizations, academics, and professionals.
- Partnerships take time, long-term funding, and care so that the member organizations can cooperate and effectively achieve their goals. Making change in communities impacted by severe environmental and socio-economic problems can be difficult and slow.

4. **Addressing the interlocking problems of the environment and the economy requires going beyond neighborhoods.** Most environmental issues are bigger than any municipality can regulate and are generally monitored by inter-governmental organizations.

- The toxic air emitted from the Hunters Point power plant and the pesticide drift in Richmond are not confined to those immediate communities.
- The BAWG recognized that the impact of passing the Precautionary Principle in San Francisco would be much stronger if all of the municipalities in the region were to follow suit.

5. **Foundations can initiate new strategies to educate, organize, and shape policy for a healthy environment.**

- The *San Francisco Foundation's Environmental Health and Justice Initiative* encourages groups with different skills working on similar issues to partner.
- The *Women's Foundation of California's Initiatives Forum* brings together historically disparate programs from different regions of the state to shape environmental health policies.
- *The Health and Environmental Funders Network* (www.hefn.org) is educating funders around the country to strategically support organizations addressing these interlocking issues.

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