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Central Valley Community Halts Building of Toxic Plant

Voice of the Valley

NEWS FEATURE, EDUARDO STANLEY, TRANSLATED BY ELENA SHORE,
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Hanford, CA – “They’ve been planning to build a toxic factory in my neighborhood, and I just found out about it?” exclaimed an indignant neighbor of Hanford, a small town 45 miles south of Fresno, whose population of just over 40,000 people is 39 percent Latino, according to the 2000 Census.

This was one of many concerns voiced at a November 15 town hall meeting of nearly 60 people, including residents, official representatives, business owners and activists.

For months, the group Kings County Residents United for Health has pressured the company Plastic Energy to explain the environmental and health consequences of installing a fuel-generating plant that would utilize plastic as its primary material.

What could have been a simple bureaucratic procedure has transformed into a struggle to clarify the health effects for residents of California’s Central Valley, already known for its dangerous level of air pollution, primarily due to the excessive use of pesticides.

According to Plastic Energy, the process consists of “returning [plastic] to its sources” and transforming it into fuel in a practice known as catalytic cracking. The company has assured the community that the process is safe and has no toxic emissions, based on two existing factories in Poland and South Korea. However, the company could not provide any statistics to support this claim.

Curiously, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, based in Fresno, had already granted the necessary permit to the King County Planning Agency in Hanford for a construction space. Everything was going along smoothly until someone noticed. Activists from the organization Greenaction, reviewing newspaper articles on the subject, discovered in January of this year that Plastic Energy had already obtained a \$2 million estimate to construct the factory in Hanford.

They decided to look for more information in the Public Information Act and later contacted local activists to analyze a similar situation that took place in 2003.

That year, the North American Power Company solicited a permit to build a power plant utilizing medical waste as its primary material in Chowchilla, a small community 35 miles north of Fresno that is home to just over 11,000 people, 29 percent of them Latino. When Greenaction asked the company to present statistics on toxic emissions and an analysis of the environmental impact, the company literally disappeared.

“Hanford is a similar case: there are no statistics supporting the claim that the planned factory isn’t toxic,” said Bradley Angel, director of Greenaction, whose participation was crucial in challenging the plant’s construction. According to Angel, the claim that the factory will not produce toxic emissions is hard to believe. He said European activists have discovered that the plant in Poland does in fact produce toxic emissions and that, confronted with this information, the company responded that it will use a new design for the plant in Hanford. But, Angel said, “We didn’t see the original design or the new one.”

“During the process of transforming the material, gases and highly toxic waste are produced when the prime

material is something like plastic," said Jane Williams, a Los Angeles resident and specialist in the subject. Plastic, she said, has high components of chlorine and metals that could produce dioxin, which is known for being carcinogenic. "Even if the emissions were minimal, the air quality in the valley is so bad that building these factories should be completely banned."

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District representative Rick McVaigh said that a permit effectively had been granted without knowing the statistics about emission control but that given pressure from citizens, the permit had been revoked. The original permit, however, did not constitute final approval, which requires another review before the construction can begin.

The company reiterated that the process is safe. "It's melting plastic to convert it into fuel," Plastic Energy representative George Larson told a skeptical audience. "If toxic emissions like chlorine got into the fuel, we wouldn't be able to sell it, so we use special filter systems." Larsen added that the industrial plant would help to eliminate a large percentage of the plastic that now lies in toxic dumps in the valley.

The most significant development of the meeting was the company's admission that it had not followed the necessary steps to keep the community informed. "Now we've lost the permit and we have to start from square one, and when we do, we'll come here and keep you informed and present you with the information you ask for."

"Official agencies get money from our taxes and it bothers me that this money is used to approve projects that compromise our health," said a visibly upset Deborah Weaver. At the end of the meeting, the crowd's collective indignation tuned into satisfaction in having achieved a great victory, now that both the company and the official agencies involved must present their cases before a vigilant community.

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