



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH TRACKING PROGRAM

Community Perspective on Environmental Health Tracking

WEST OAKLAND ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS PROJECT- INDICATORS STUDY ([WWW.NEIP.ORG](http://www.neip.org))

BACKGROUND

West Oakland is a neighborhood located on the San Francisco Bay in Northern California. Situated next to freeways, the Port of Oakland, an Army base, and various industrial sites, the community of over 23,400 residents faces serious environmental hazards and health outcomes such as air pollution, toxics, and asthma. Despite facing economic, environmental, and social challenges, the community has maintained a culture of community involvement and activism.

ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

The West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (EIP) began as a partnership between the Pacific Institute, a research institution, and the 7th Street/McClymonds Corridor Neighborhood Improvement Initiative, a West Oakland community organization that emphasizes resident leadership in the development and implementation of strategies to improve the community.

The neighborhood Environmental Indicators Project (EIP) provides science-based information on environmental and social conditions at the neighborhood level. We hope this research will support those who are fighting for clean air, healthy families and a safe community. But this project is about more than research. By giving the public the tools and resources needed to use this information, we hope to improve community capacity for advocacy, and strengthen the neighborhood's relationship to local, regional and national planning and policymaking.

EIP website, www.neip.org, June 20, 2003

ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Environmental health indicators are measures of environmentally-related health conditions, environmental quality, and sociodemographics. While indicators do not necessarily represent a direct relationship between environment and health, they can be used to assess current environmental and health conditions, identify areas requiring attention and research, and provide early warnings of potential problems. For the Indicators Project, West Oakland residents collaboratively identified neighborhood level indicators that needed to be measured or reported in order to further community goals. Using this input, EIP conducted research and summarized the results in **Neighborhood Knowledge for Change: The West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (January 2002)**.

The results of the report provided scientific data that supported many of the residents' previous concerns. One community concern was air pollution from the Red Star Yeast Factory, which had been located in West Oakland for nearly a century, and was in close proximity to residents. The Indicators Project identified the factory as one of the largest fixed sources of toxic air pollution in the entire city of Oakland. It also revealed that the toxins being released from the facility had been linked to health outcomes like cancer and respiratory toxicity. Because the factory was "grandfathered" in for zoning regulations, it existed very close to residential uses and was chronically causing bad odors and fumes. The community took action to demand that the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) develop stronger regulations to require the factory to reduce pollution and reduce noxious odors.

While the West Oakland community had previously been active around environmental issues, it had limited experience and capacity to use technical information for community organizing and advocacy. EIP identified several challenges to transforming scientific research into community action. These challenges included increasing community advocates' technical understanding, disseminating report results in a manner appropriate for lay audiences, and improving community capacity for advocacy and communication with stakeholders at varying levels of expertise.

CHALLENGES

In order to address these challenges, EIP developed a number of trainings, tools, and strategies to assist community residents in using the indicators results. To facilitate communication of results to residents, EIP developed several educational brochures appropriate for lay audiences about report subjects such as asthma, clean air, and displacement. EIP also guided the development of a Speakers Bureau composed of trained community residents. These community members presented report results and discussed community goals around the indicators to various community and policy audiences, such as church groups, local community organizations, and the elected officials. Community members and policy analysts also participated in an EIP-hosted policy forum, developing a list of policy options in response to the report. The policy forum resulted in “community goals” sheets that residents presented to elected officials including U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Lee, State Representative Wilma Chan, and Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson. Finally, community members underwent media advocacy training, learning to design and disseminate messages, communicate with the media, and write press releases, press advisories, and opinion pieces.

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

With EIP’s support, community residents were able to present and discuss the indicators results, organize the community, and advocate around the Red Star Yeast air emissions issue. The community also generated media attention and support from local officials. Based on the indicator information and the community goals, each of the elected officials (from the city to federal level) wrote letters to the BAAQMD demanding stronger regulations and enforcement at Red Star Yeast. As a result of community efforts, the BAAQMD drafted new regulations requiring the yeast factory to comply with current emissions standards. This accomplished one of the community’s main clean air goals. In the end, however, Red Star Yeast was not able to meet the emission standards without substantial investment and decided that closing the factory was its best option.

The West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project demonstrates how this type of data can be used when it is relevant to the community and when the community has the capacity to understand and utilize it. West Oakland residents effectively combined research and training with their own expertise to create significant and positive change for their community.

“I always talked about toxic pollution in West Oakland, but now I have the specifics I need: I can now tell people there are 33,000 pounds of acetaldehyde coming out Red StarYeast every year. This information has helped me be a better advocate for clean air in West Oakland.”

*- Monsa Nitoto, Vice Chair, 7th St. Initiative, Executive Director,
Coalition for West Oakland Revitalization*

“The indicators were very powerful, and very useful in our complex community. We found that the indicator information could be used at any level in government agencies and community based organizations to advocate for change. I hope that other communities see the power of having knowledge to improve their neighborhoods.”

*- Margaret Gordon, West Oakland Resident,
WO EIP Neighborhood Committee*

EIP indicates that an ideal environmental health tracking network should:

- 1) Improve knowledge about the relationship between the environment and health status (of West Oakland residents);
- 2) Provide accessible and usable data on the relationship between community health and environment that might help to answer community questions;
- 3) Provide useful information in a timely manner for policy, advocacy, and public health actions;
- 4) Build community capacity and providing trainings on how to access and use the data.

HOW ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH TRACKING CAN HELP