

Health hazard: West Fresno the riskiest place to live in California

By Mark Grossi

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Neighborhood activist Mary Curry watches a truck leave the Darling rendering plant in southwest Fresno Thursday, March 7, 2013.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS/THE FRESNO BEE

From the Hyde Park mound in West Fresno, you can see the city landscape quickly go from residential to industrial park. You can smell it, too.

Across the street, there is an animal rendering plant, a poultry facility, a meat distributor and a PG&E substation. The Hyde Park mound itself is a converted garbage landfill.

But there is more: high asthma rates, widespread poverty and low birth weights that scientists link to dirty air, chemical exposures and a host of other problems.

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The California Environmental Protection Agency takes it a step further. EPA says people in West Fresno live with higher health risks than anyone in California -- higher than any part of Los Angeles, Oakland or any place else you can name.

Life expectancy in West Fresno is more than 20 years lower than in northeast Fresno, according to a 2012 study done by a team of researchers including the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at Fresno State.

West Fresno and many parts of the Valley soon will be known as the riskiest places in California to live. Financial help appears to be headed this way, but there is controversy surrounding it.

The state EPA is expected to designate the most environmentally burdened areas in the next few weeks. West Fresno is at the top of the list, and several other Valley ZIP codes are not far behind. **(Update: On Tuesday, April 23, the state released [the CalEnviroScreen mapping tool](#).)**

The state EPA's draft documents show the Valley has nine of the 12 worst places in California, including four in Fresno County and three in Stockton. The map of California's worst 10% shows mostly Valley ZIP codes. **(Update: The final state list released Tuesday shows the Valley has eight of the 12 worst places in California.)**

The state's designations will be part of a program called California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool, or CalEnviroScreen.

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Businesses and industries worry that the science is vague and might be misused by government agencies. State leaders say the tool is not intended to replace project analysis, laws or planning.

The tool will fulfill part of the 2006 state greenhouse gas law, Senate Bill 535, by identifying such high-risk places, known as disadvantaged communities.

Funds will be raised from auctions of greenhouse gas allowances for California companies. Disadvantaged communities will be favored to get that money to address their problems.

Disadvantaged community is a good description of West Fresno. Mary Curry of the activist group Concerned Citizens of West Fresno says it has been this way for decades.

"We ask for help," she said. "Nobody has been listening."

The San Joaquin Valley has nine of the 12 most environmentally burdened places in California, including four in Fresno County and three in Stockton.

The map of California's worst 5% shows many Valley ZIP codes. The state's designations will be part of a program called California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool, or CalEnviroScreen.

Source: California Environmental Protection Agency

But state EPA is paying attention. And it's no surprise the state recognizes the multiple layers of risks in West Fresno and the Valley above other places in the state, says Jonathan London of the University of California at Davis.

He worked on a 2011 study about Valley pollution and health risks, including West Fresno and the Kings County community of Kettleman City, which is just a few miles from a hazardous waste landfill.

London said, "People with low income and people of color are disproportionately located in those places with high concentrations of factors that can lead to poor health conditions."

Place your bets

If you live in West Fresno, will you really die younger? Will you actually get asthma, cancer, heart disease or other serious health problems?

The science is not intended to make such individual predictions, says John Capitman, executive director of the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at Fresno State. It is not a health assessment, which goes into far more depth and history of a patient.

"I'm looking at the big shape of the iceberg," he said, "not little pieces of it."

Scientists say they are looking at risk -- the odds that something may happen. The risks are higher in places such as West Fresno and Kettleman City, but lower in the Woodward Park area of Fresno.

In his 2012 "Place Matters" study, Capitman said he calculated mortality rates in each Valley ZIP code. He also included such details as income, ethnicity, education and pollution exposure.

But what if some aspect of lifestyle, such as diet, could account for the early mortality?

Capitman said it would be hard to make that case. The repeating patterns in the places with the highest early mortality suggest something more than lifestyle problems.

"We saw communities of color, immigrants, low income, high exposure to air pollution, clusters along Highway 99, asthma," he said. "So are they all eating the wrong things? I don't think so."

Life expectancy in West Fresno's ZIP code is 69 years old or less, according to Capitman's study. Life expectancy in the more affluent Woodward Park ZIP code is up to 90 years old.

[In the state's CalEnviroScreen document, the contrasts between the two are just as striking.](#) The pollution burden in West Fresno is rated more than three times higher.

The populations are near the same size -- 41,087 in West Fresno and 45,191 in Woodward Park, state EPA shows. But there are vast differences in education, birth weights, poverty, ethnicity and asthma rates.

One dramatic example of the differences: pesticide applications. Located in an urban-farming transition area, West Fresno ranks in the 90th percentile for such chemicals statewide. Amid rows of suburban homes around northeast Fresno, the Woodward Park ZIP code ranks in the 23rd percentile.

There are objections and doubts about the way the state is presenting this information, especially about pesticides.

The California Farm Bureau Federation last month wrote a letter to the state EPA, saying the screening tool makes it look as though pesticide use equates to 100% exposure.

"These pesticides have the strictest application and use regulations (buffer zones, worker safety clothing requirements, restricted entry intervals, etc.) of any pesticide applications nationwide," wrote Cynthia Cory, the Farm Bureau group's director of environmental affairs.

But the tool is intended only as a screening device, said John Faust, of the state EPA's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. The EPA is not assessing blame or indicating the level of exposure, he said.

The agency does not have complete information on exposures to such chemicals, Faust said. But the screening is important because it shows where people might be vulnerable to such chemicals.

"We're finding out where people use chemicals as a way to get at the question of where exposures are taking place," said Faust.

West Fresno's fight

Mary Curry says everyone in West Fresno knows someone in the community with asthma. She has it. The CalEnviroScreen draft document shows West Fresno's emergency room visits for asthma rank in the 98th percentile -- among the highest in the state.

Curry says the Concerned Citizens of West Fresno will fight for health, adding that the animal rendering plant is at the top of the list.

But is the rendering plant part of the risk?

The plant on West Belgravia Avenue, owned by Texas-based Darling International Inc., has operated nearly 60 years. The company has spent millions of dollars in the last decade upgrading its operation.

The plant is not among the four companies identified in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Program for the 93706 ZIP code.

One company on the list is Cargill Meat Solutions Corp. on South Fig Avenue. Its chemical releases are basically ammonia, according to federal EPA.

But Curry says the stench of the Darling rendering plant makes life miserable for people. Ask any West Fresno who has asthma, she says.

"The wind knows no boundaries," she said.

Curry says it's just one more layer of stress on an overburdened West Fresno where the battle for health seems endless.

The 81-year-old Curry is no stranger to public battles. In 1985, she was the first African-American woman elected to the Fresno Unified School District board before being recalled in 1990 during her second term.

She and the Concerned Citizens of West Fresno sued the city of Fresno last year over the rendering plant.

The group says the owners should apply for a conditional-use permit to process the 850,000 pounds of animal carcasses and animal parts into such products as poultry feed and tallow. A hearing is scheduled May 21 in Fresno County Superior Court.

West Fresno and the rendering plant are not high political agendas around Fresno, says the Rev. Chris Breedlove, pastor of College Community Congregational Church. He says Fresnoans need to help their neighbor.

Breedlove last year wrote a Fresno Bee Valley Voices opinion about the rendering plant. He says he has heard people say: Why don't they just move from West Fresno?

"Many people don't have that luxury," Breedlove said. "That's where they are stuck."

Resources

[Rating California environmental quality by ZIP code \(Excel spreadsheet\)](#)

[Read more about the state program CalEnviroScreen](#)

[Study: "Place Matters for Health in the San Joaquin Valley"](#)

[Study: "Land of Risk, Land of Opportunity"](#)

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Toggle Description Description

Here's a truncated version of an Excel spreadsheet that provides extensive air quality information by California ZIP code. [Full spreadsheet](#)

[Original Document \(PDF\)](#) »

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