

Alternative fuels power 87% of Santa Monica's city fleet.



CLEARING THE AIR

AT LEAST 10 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP REDUCE POLLUTION IN L.A.

By Christina Elston

On a recent Saturday morning, a couple dozen people – school teachers, college students, journalists, environmental activists and a few friends and children – stood on a sidewalk in Southeast Los Angeles, some holding their noses, many shaking their heads. On one side of the street was an animal rendering plant, the source of a stomach-turning stench.

“Imagine walking to school in the morning, and you can still smell that, even when you get to the playground,” Robert Cabrales said. He had. Then Cabrales turned to the other side of the street and pointed to a smokestack. “That plant has been fined several times for putting lead into the air,” he explained. “They just keep paying the fines because that’s cheaper than fixing it. But there’s no smell. Sometimes it’s what you can’t smell that can really hurt you.”

Cabrales, Southeast L.A. organizer at Communities for a Better Environment, conducts monthly “toxic tours” to help people understand the consequences that come with our way of life.

Part of the toll it takes is on the air we breathe. You can do something about that.

Learn about it, talk about it

Start by educating yourself about pollution. Los Angeles has the largest ports in the country. Tons of goods from other parts of the world enter

here and depart for other cities and states on a parade of diesel trucks that spew pollution as they go. When someone goes to Target for socks or Walmart for a television, “there’s a good chance that that bag of tube socks or that flat-screen TV came through L.A.,” says Sen. Kevin de Leon (D-Los Angeles), who has introduced legislation that would help keep cap-and-trade dollars from polluters in the communities impacted by their pollution. “Our children subsidize the low cost of those goods with their lungs.”

Most goods leave the ports via the 710 Freeway, which Angelo Logan, co-executive director of East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, calls the “Walmart Superhighway.” Logan’s group was founded around community concerns about the 710 expansion, and one of their main goals is to turn community members into “well-informed self-advocates.”

Logan warns against falling for “green washing.” Our ports, for example, have made progress, but are still the biggest source of air pollution in the L.A. basin. “At this point it’s kind of like they went from unfiltered to filtered cigarettes,” Logan says. He contends good publicity they have received as the cleanest ports in the country reduces the pressure to keep improving.

You can ...

Read *Smogtown: The Lung-Burning History of Pollution in Los Angeles* (Overlook, 2008). If you’re not a native, this fascinating

(though often disturbing) book by journalists Chip Jacobs and William Kelly will give you some background on the issue. If you are, this entertaining read will take you back to your lung-burning childhood. From the first smog attacks of the early 1940s, the book by the two SoCal natives details the creation of the first smog agency, the evolution of smog science, and the birth of an environmental movement.

Take a Toxic Tour. For a more immediate and up-close look at the situation, book a spot on a free Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) tour. You'll board a comfy charter bus in Huntington Park for a three-hour look at industrial Southeast L.A., the port and rail yards of Long Beach and the oil refineries of Wilmington.

This isn't sightseeing, it's blight-seeing. And the experience will clench your lungs and open your eyes. The views of the rail yards and port equipment that keeps our commerce moving are staggering, but it's equally moving to stand in a little cul-de-sac and watch families come home with their groceries while smokestacks from an oil refinery spew into the afternoon air. Visit www.cbecal.org/action/toxic.html for info.

Check out these organizations and websites.

- AQMD – www.aqmd.gov
- The Impact Project – <http://hydra.usc.edu/scehsc/web/index.html>
- Coalition for Clean Air – www.coalitionforcleanair.org
- Communities for a Better Environment – www.cbecal.org
- East Yard Center for Environmental Justice – www.eycej.org
- Move L.A. – www.movela.org

Stand up for research and regulation

Research about the health impacts of air pollution is essential ammunition for lawmakers working to regulate polluters. "Especially as the air gets cleaner, we take it for granted," says Dan Costa, interim national director for air climate and energy research at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

EPA recently funded new Clean Air Research Centers at Emory University/Georgia Institute of Technology, Michigan State University, University of Washington and Harvard University. They'll study "multi-pollutant" mixtures and their impact on the brain, the heart, obesity, and birth impacts.

But the agency discontinued funding for the Southern California Particle Center at UCLA, which will end its work this year. Costa explains that EPA is shifting away from particulate-only research, toward programs that study the whole mix of pollution in the air at once. And there is only so much cash available in their budget. "My air research program has exactly the same dollar-level funding as it had in 1998," Costa says.

The National Clean Diesel Campaign is also hurting for funds. The program awarded around \$23 million in grants locally between 2008 and 2010, pulling approximately 30 tons of particulate out of the South Coast air and replacing or retrofitting 1,000 diesel engines.

Penny McDaniel, who helps run the program's West Coast Collaborative, says there's good return on those dollars. "Our estimates equate \$13 in public health benefits with every \$1 invested in diesel emission reduction," she says. This comes

from fewer ER and doctor visits, and fewer lost days at work and school. "I'd put my dollar there," says McDaniel. "It's a good investment."

The grants help electrify trucks, cranes and tugboats at the ports; retrofit and replace long-haul trucks and municipal vehicles like trash trucks; and retrofit or replace school buses. But due to budget constraints, the campaign isn't offering new grants for 2012. And McDaniel says there are still 11 million diesel vehicles in the U.S. in need of cleanup.

Meanwhile, the economy also threatens to take its toll on California's regulatory standards. Sen. Fran Pavley (D-Santa Monica) authored AB 32, designed to reduce greenhouse gases 25% statewide by 2020. In November supporters of the law defeated Prop. 23, a measure funded by out-of-state interests to suspend implementation of the law in the name of protecting jobs. "They spent millions of dollars trying to confuse the public in California," she says, but the voters didn't believe them.

But opposition to the law from coal and oil states continues. "On the federal level it's very much under attack with the change in Congress," Pavley says. "It's about special interest money and its influence in Washington, D.C."

The California Air Resources board late last year also cited economic reasons for a slowdown in implementing controls on diesel emissions.

You can ...

Make your voice heard. Pavley and Costa say that if clean air is a priority for you, you should let your city council members, state and federal legislators know. "Pick up the phone or send an email," Pavley urges. "Parents' voices are critically important in this debate."

Note how they vote. At the ballot box, "look for candidates who make air quality and the environment a priority," says Joe Lyou, president and CEO of the Coalition for Clean Air. "If they're not talking about it, they won't likely provide leadership there, and they might not be a good vote." The League of California Conservation Voters (www.ecovote.org) makes it easy to learn how your legislators have voted on key environmental issues.



Robert Cabrera leads toxic tours for Communities for a Better Environment.

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Angelo Logan of East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice works to create "well-informed self-advocates." PHOTO BY TERRESA BURGESS

Bring it on home

The fact that L.A.'s air is getting cleaner even as our population and the number of vehicles on the road increases is impressive. But even as the air clears, we are learning that the health impacts of the pollution that remains are worse than we'd ever imagined. "We can't rest on our laurels," says Lyou.

The Coalition for Clean Air focuses on transportation issues, issues that go way beyond carpooling. "The low-hanging fruit in terms of air quality was picked long ago," Lyou says. And as we learn more about the impact of polluted air on children, air standards will eventually become so strict "we won't have any choice but to completely revolutionize the way we get around in Los Angeles." To do this, we'll need involvement from people who haven't traditionally taken a stand on air quality, especially people making decisions about land use. For public transportation to work, for instance, it has to reach people where they live and connect them to where they work.

That's not to say that individuals don't play a role.

You can ...

Think hard about the next car you buy. "People buy a car based on what they do a couple of times a year," says Rick Sikes, fleet superintendent for the City of Santa Monica. But how often do you drive to the mountains for skiing or to Grandma's house in Arizona? Do you haul home a load from the hardware store weekly, or just now and again?

When you're ready to shop for a new vehicle, start by calculating how many miles you actually drive in an average day, week and month. "If you're not going more than 100 miles in a day or 100 miles in a trip, I would look at an electric car," says Sikes, who knows a thing or two about alternative fuel vehicles.

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Santa Monica started switching to alternative fuels in the early 1980s, and 87% of the city's vehicles run on alternative fuels – electric, natural gas, and even propane.

If you're regularly outside the 100-mile zone, Sikes suggests looking into hybrids like the Chevy Volt, or even a natural-gas-powered Honda Civic. Cleancarmaps.com can help you locate charging/filling stations for electric, natural gas, biodiesel, and hydrogen vehicles. In Santa Monica, electric vehicles have free parking at city meters, and lots of options for charging, including stations at the Civic Center and the Santa Monica Pier.

Switch out your mower (or your gardener's). Fight pollution in your back yard with AQMD's annual lawnmower exchange program. Bring in a working gasoline-powered lawnmower and they will sell you a cordless electric mower at a deeply discounted price. Find out how to join the listserv and receive an alert about the next exchange at www.aqmd.gov.

Put out the fire. Atwood says 1.4 million households use wood-burning fireplaces in SoCal, producing an average 6 tons of particulate pollution per day. That's four times as much as our local power plants. Consider converting to a gas-burning fireplace, or burning candles instead.

Get App-y. Put your smart phone to work with a clean air app from AQMD. Use it to check the air quality at your current location, find fueling stations for your alternative-fuel vehicle, measure your carbon footprint, and report smoggy cars. (You can also do this by calling 800-CUT-SMOG.)

Shop smart. When you buy something – anything – you can also start to ask the simple questions, "Where did this come from?" and "How did it get here?" You might not be able to afford a Made-in-the-U.S. alternative, or there might not be one, but realizing how our purchases shape our environment is a start. As Angelo Logan says, "There are lifelong consequences to our actions." Many of those consequences aren't just for us. They're also for our children. Take a deep breath, and think it over. ♦

Christina Elston is managing editor of *L.A. Parent*.

IN THE
AIR

About This Series

"In the Air" is being produced as a project for The California Endowment Health Journalism Fellowships, a program of USC's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism.

- **January:** In Utero, how air pollution affects babies in the womb.
- **February:** The Kids Aren't Alright, rising asthma rates among children.
- **March:** Teenage Lungs, the long-term effects of breathing smog.
- **April:** Clearing the Air, efforts at change and what you can do.