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West Siders Smoldering Over Dirty Industries

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Last Updated: September 21, 2005, 04:32:41 AM PDT

A suspicion is growing out among the stone-quiet farm fields and barren Diablo Range foothills lining western Stanislaus County: the West Side has become the county's dumping ground.

Last year's tire pile fire ignited a storm of criticism that won't go away. West Side residents view the fire's environmental threat as simply one more thing they have to put up with.

West Siders also have a county dump, a garbage-burning plant, Tartaric Manufacturing, a sewage plant and an EPA Superfund site. A recent proposal has been made to burn medical waste at the garbage burning plant. About a year ago, West Side residents fought off a plan to move the stench-ridden Modesto Tallow plant next to the dump. A year before, they rallied against a prison proposed south of Newman. "I've heard a lot of people say, "What do they think we are? Anything they don't want near the big cities, they dump near our neck of the woods," said Newman resident Julian Bentayeb, who signed a petition last year to eliminate the smell coming from the Tartaric plant.

"I suppose that's the idea -- we'll put everything on the West Side hills because it's away from the big cities," said former Patterson City Councilman John Azevedo. "I don't want everything to come over here to the West Side. We're not the dumping place." There's even a bureaucratic name for these sites. Planners call them LULUs: Locally Unwanted Land Uses. Some take in waste from the Bay Area and other more populated parts of the state. Stanislaus County supervisors and Modesto City Council members are studying a plan to burn 15,000 tons of medical waste from Northern California each year.

"Now their greed has brought them to the point of considering bringing in medical waste. This isn't a garbage dump out here," said Karen Cox, who lives two miles east of the tire-burning plant she fought against.

Some suggest it is no accident that the West Side evolved into a dumping ground. A few call it environmental racism, a documented phenomenon in which LULUs go to areas with larger concentrations of poor and minority residents.

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"If you look in the Central Valley, at where they put power plants, garbage dumps, toxic waste dumps and other dirty industrial facilities, they are disproportionately placed in Latino communities," said attorney Luke Cole.

He's co-author of a book, "From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement," to be published by New York University Press this fall. He directs California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation's Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment.

Businesses and government agencies consider zoning, land costs and transportation access when deciding where to locate a facility. But government decisions influencing those factors are based in racism, Cole said.

Prominent studies such as one by MIT economist Yale Rabin show that between 1920 and 1960, minority communities were zoned for commercial and industrial, while most white communities were zoned strictly as residential, he added. Freeways and railroad tracks often are built in poor minority communities. Land with industrial and commercial uses is less desirable for homes, and thus cheaper.

West Side communities appear to fit Cole's definition. The towns have large Hispanic populations, many of them initially drawn to work in the fields.

"People don't want to look at how this has racial underpinnings. Look at the situation: they were living there, and these things were placed on top of them. It's not that it was the only place they could afford to live," Cole said.

Patterson resident John Mataka believes locating the facilities on the West Side amounts to economic racism.

"Because there's a lot of agricultural jobs, and poor people, and a lot of Hispanic people, they feel -- put whatever you want out there, because they're not going to say anything. They are too busy trying to survive," he said. "They sure in heck wouldn't put no tire burner anyplace but out here. My feeling is they take the West Side for granted."

And just what do these communities live with?

* Until it closed this year, the tire-burning plant incinerated 5 million tires trucked in from Fresno to Redding each year.

* Located near Crows Landing, the dump accepts up to 108,000 tons of garbage each year from Stanislaus, San Jose, Oakland and other areas. Next door, a garbage-burning plant burns 800 tons of solid waste from Stanislaus County daily. Tartaric Manufacturing hopes to process up to 100,000 gallons of winemaking sediment a day if it resumes operating near Newman this fall.

* Next to Patterson, 26 million gallons of partially treated sewage flows into the city of Modesto's secondary treatment plant each day and is discharged into the Stanislaus River, a wastewater disposal ranch or storage ponds after being treated to meet federal and state standards.

* In 1997, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency discovered toxic sludge in abandoned waste oil recycling tanks near Patterson. The EPA

declared the area a Superfund site and ordered a \$9.5 million cleanup funded by some of the 12,000 Central Valley and Bay Area government agencies, trucking companies and other businesses that paid haulers to ship oil to Petroleum Recycling Corp.

Some say blame lies with short-sighted thinking or politics -- specifically, the lack of a county supervisor who lived on the West Side when the county board approved the facilities. The garbage burner, tire burner and dump expansion were approved in the late 1980s, when the West Side's representative lived in Ceres.

At that time, few West Siders fought these land uses. Many were afraid to be labeled troublemakers or suffer from retaliation, said Solange Goncalves Altman, an attorney in the 1987 suit against the tire incinerator. Only a handful joined the first lawsuit challenging an unwanted land use on the West Side, she said.

However, the West Side is changing as more demanding commuters flee the high cost of living in the Bay Area, she said, adding, "Those people are just not going to accept the kind of stuff that was allowed to go on before."

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