

# Toxic hotspots revealed on state map

Local areas include: Barrio Logan, Escondido, Chula Vista, El Cajon, National City

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan • U-T 9:56 a.m. July 7, 2013



[\(/photos/2013/jul/05/1054207/\)](/photos/2013/jul/05/1054207/)

Georgette Gomez, associate director of an environmental health coalition is spearheading efforts to change zoning in her community of Barrio Logan where chemical storage and cleaning operations coexist side by side with residential complexes. — *Peggy Peattie*

Barrio Logan, a port community at the intersection of freeways and industry, is the crossroads of pollution risk for San Diego County, according to CalEnviroScreen, a new state program that ranks communities by their environmental health.

The California Environmental Protection Agency recently rolled out the program to highlight areas most affected by pollution. Also high on the list for this county are parts of Escondido, Chula Vista, National City and El Cajon.

The program is something various public-health and environmental groups have long sought: a way of analyzing the combined effects of multiple pollutants along with residents' susceptibility to their risks. But state money earmarked for the program was borrowed to shore up the general fund, leaving solutions for polluted communities uncertain.

The report measures air and water pollution, diesel exhaust, toxins and other factors to calculate pollution burdens of communities at the ZIP code level. It also evaluates socioeconomic and health factors such as asthma rates, poverty and ethnicity to determine the population's vulnerability to pollution.

That hodgepodge of housing and industry has been prohibited in most communities for decades, but lingers in urban areas such as Barrio Logan.

The consequence can be seen in emergency room records showing that the neighborhood has three times the rate of asthma hospitalizations as the county as a whole, Gomez said. CalEnviroScreen data rank it among the 92nd percentile statewide for asthma rates.

Asthma patients are more vulnerable to air pollution than other people, the report states. And Barrio Logan also falls in the 91st percentile for diesel particulates — a combination that may create a vicious spiral of breathing problems for residents. High rates of poverty and low rates of education and English fluency also place its residents at risk, according to the screening tool.

In Escondido, a similar combination of housing and industry may conspire to make part of the city a pollution hot spot, Councilwoman Olga Diaz said.

“The ZIP code (ranked as high risk) includes the industrial portion of our city,” home to operations such as an asphalt plant and transit center, Diaz said. “We have some uses that are not exactly green industries that are operating here. That’s possibly because Escondido is a 125-year-old city, and the rules that now regulate pollutants are stricter. So the industrial parts of the city have been this way for a long time, and that cannot be changed easily.”

On further reflection, however, she noticed that the hot spot also includes Kit Carson Park, the city’s vast, 285-acre recreation and nature area, along with the Vineyard Golf Course and agricultural fields.

“The ZIP code that includes the industrial park also includes some more affluent communities,” Diaz said. “So there may be sub areas within that ZIP code that shouldn’t be classified as high-risk areas.”

Those wouldn’t likely produce industrial pollution, she noted, but could be a source of pesticide exposure, another factor in the screening. Those distinctions, she said, aren’t apparent at the ZIP-code level.

It’s a drawback that state officials acknowledge. Much of the data they used was only available by ZIP code, said Sam Delson, a deputy director for the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, the CalEPA department that prepared the report. He pointed out that the report is titled CalEnviroScreen 1.0, in a nod to expected future editions.

Subsequent versions of the report, which cost about half a million dollars to produce, would be whittled down to the census tract level, providing a more refined view of environmental health.

Diaz said she’s excited about the screening program, but looks forward to more precise information that could pinpoint local sources of pollution.

“So the census tract data may be the more useful tool,” she said. “But my gosh, it’s great that we have any data.”

The screening program was developed not only to point out pollution, but to prioritize cleanup. Last fall the state began auctions through its greenhouse gas cap-and-trade program, a function of the 2006 Global Warming Solutions Act. Mindful that plants buying credits to relieve their responsibility for cutting greenhouse gases may also emit high levels of other pollutants, the act required that some of the some of the program's fees be used to offset its impacts on disadvantaged communities.

A quarter of the cap-and-trade fees were earmarked for programs that benefit disadvantaged communities — defined at the top 10 percent of polluted areas identified by the screening program, according to the state Department of Finance. Ten percent of fees must be spent directly within those communities.

As the fees began to accumulate, however, the state decided to loan \$500 million from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction fund to the state general fund, the finance department stated. It has pledged to repay that half-billion dollars with interest, but the loan delays the start of local programs by several years.

Despite the funding delay, Delson said the program represents an effort to address collective effects of pollution.

"Instead of looking at each problem in isolation, whether it's air quality or water quality, this is an attempt to look at the combined effects and the combined burdens of all these problems, and to take a comprehensive approach to addressing multiple types of pollution simultaneously," he said.

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