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Biomass Battle Casts Spotlight on Environmental Justice [The Biomass Monitor]

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- by *Josh Schlossberg, The Biomass Monitor*

Sometimes what seems like defeat in the short term can actually turn out to be victory in the long run. One such case involves the opposition to the construction of Seneca Sawmill's biomass power incinerator in Eugene, Oregon. While the facility fired up its smokestacks for the first time in 2011, the effort to educate neighborhood residents about the health threats of the industrial polluter morphed into a powerful environmental justice movement in the low-income community surrounding the facility.



Alison Guzman (center) and Lisa Arkin (left) of Beyond Toxics in Eugene, Oregon

When Eugene-based [Beyond Toxics](#) (formerly [Oregon Toxics Alliance](#)) set out to question the “green” credentials of [Seneca Sawmill](#)'s biomass power plant in 2010—an 18.8 megawatt facility adjacent to the timber corporation's existing lumber mill—they knew the deck was stacked against them. In a state where the timber industry still commands a great (some say disproportionate) amount of political influence, the organization wasn't under any illusions that the corporation would voluntarily scrap its plans to profit off the sale of excess electricity to [Eugene Water and Electric Board](#).

Surprisingly, despite [Seneca Jones Timber Company](#)'s dismal track record of clearcutting hundreds of thousands of acres of Oregon forests—including old growth—and dousing them with toxic herbicides—including in Eugene's drinking watershed—few local or state environmental groups spoke out against the biomass incinerator.

In 2009, the [Lane County Health Advisory Committee](#) [concluded](#) that “biomass plants would add to our already overburdened air pollution problem in Eugene,” in a county that had been stuck with a “D” in air quality from the [American Lung Association](#). This reality encouraged Beyond Toxics to zero in on the air pollution impacts of the proposed facility to the local community.

In 2010, Beyond Toxics hired Alison Guzman as a community organizer. West Eugene was already suffering from the pollution of a rail yard, a wood treatment plant, and several other sources of toxic contamination. Most industrial facilities emit a stew of poisons in the form of volatile organic compounds, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, according to Guzman, which the American Lung Association has linked to cancer, heart attacks, strokes, and birth defects. Unfortunately, [Lane Regional Air Protection Agency \(LRAPA\)](#), a state agency with the mission to “protect public health, community well-being and the environment as a leader and

advocate for the improvement and maintenance of air quality,” refused to acknowledge West Eugene as an environmental justice community.

“That’s when we got together to do canvassing to get an idea of health, income status and demographics and perspectives about quality of air” in the neighborhood, said Guzman.

Guzman and her colleagues learned that the hybrid industrial/residential neighborhood of West Eugene consisted of many **low income residents and people of color**—an 11 to 31 percent minority population, with Eugene’s average minority population at only 5 percent.

Beyond Toxics teamed up with **Centro Latino Americano**, a Eugene-based organization that advocates for members of the Latino community, to launch a canvass in West Eugene to build awareness and get the perspective of residents on the new polluter on the block. The canvass revealed that the majority of West Eugene residents had not been notified that the incinerator had been permitted and was under construction at the time.

Of the community members who were aware of the impending facility, some were concerned about exposure to particulate matter from wood burning—invisible particles that are so small they can be inhaled deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream and internal organs—causing asthma and other serious health impacts. Even those Eugeneans most familiar with biomass health threats had been kept in the dark in regards to biomass incinerator emissions of carcinogenic acrolein, styrene, formaldehyde and heavy metals, none of which are reported in air pollution permits.

Sixty percent of the 350 residents canvassed had already detected air pollution issues and reported a high rate of self-reported asthma—thirty percent. Beyond Toxics contacted neighborhood schools and calculated an asthma rate of over thirteen percent, “significantly higher than the rest of the county and nation,” said Guzman. According to Guzman, the closest homes sit only 1,500 feet away from Seneca’s smokestack, the nearest elementary school is 1.5 miles away.

Using GIS to map industries, schools, health clinics, and access to services in West Eugene, Beyond Toxics found “correlations to health impacts with income status with that of percentage of minorities and where industries are located.”

Guzman finds it ironic how on a bad air day in Eugene, individuals are banned from using their woodstoves to heat their homes, while corporations like Seneca Sawmill can burn whatever they want. “We’re all sharing the same airshed,” reminds Guzman. “Nobody is measuring the cumulative impacts.”



Infographic by Eugene Weekly

While pollution isn’t at “the top of the list” for most people understandably focused on paying bills and feeding their kids, Guzman points out how “exposure to toxics leads to chronic health effects which come up later in life.” And it’s the families that end up footing the bills for these pollution-related health problems.

In April 2012, Beyond Toxics took two busloads of people, including Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy, employees of the **Environmental Protection Agency** and **Department of Environmental Quality**, journalists, students and concerned citizens on a guided tour through West Eugene. The bus stopped at “significant

industrial sources,” including the operating Seneca Sawmill biomass incinerator, with Arkin listing off the chemicals released from each of the facilities.

“Just because an industry has a permit that doesn’t mean they’re not polluting,” Arkin reminded the passengers. 3,313,000 pounds of air toxics—96% of all air toxics in Eugene—were released in the zip code, according to Arkin, citing “disproportionate impacts” on the West Eugene community.

Other stops featured residents talking about their [troubling experiences](#) with their industrial neighbors. Arcenia, a West Eugene resident of ten years, told how her child has suffered from asthma since birth and how she can’t open the windows some days. Another local, Josefina, said “sometimes we’d like to go for a walk with our families, but we can’t because the stink is just so bad.” When Marina moved to the neighborhood two years prior, on the very first day her thirteen year old daughter felt “nauseous and dizzy,” which she links to local air pollution.

While the Seneca Sawmill biomass facility fired up in 2011—only to promptly [fail its first air pollution test](#)—the biomass resistance in Eugene isn’t over.

Beyond Toxics is working on a GIS system to plot locations to conduct their own testing of Seneca’s incinerator emissions. The organization is also teaming up with **Oregon State University** on a pilot project to distribute a bracelet which can be worn by neighborhood residents to measure levels of exposure to toxic air pollution. The hope is that the data gleaned from these studies can be used to make the case against the construction of new biomass incinerators elsewhere.

Extending beyond the biomass issue, the community organizing efforts have created a “broader discourse under the framework of environmental justice,” said Guzman. “How can communities in the future be a part of the decision making process?” Beyond Toxics continues to work with residents to ensure that West Eugene’s industrial corridor doesn’t keep recruiting the same sort of polluting industries that have been setting shop over the decades.

The environmental justice spotlight has already helped spur the cleanup of a pond where toxic creosote logs had been dumped by Pacific Railway years before, as well as move a proposed housing development to a site further from sources of local pollution. Other ripples include increased discourse on the access to health care in the neighborhood and the creation of community gardens.

“We are the guinea pigs,” said Guzman, “in terms of being small enough to make a change and big enough to make an impact,” not just in Oregon but the rest of the nation, and possibly the world.

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Environmental Injustice in Philadelphia

March 31, 2013 — Margaret Motheral (not verified)

I'm alone in the Mt Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia. I bought my 1st house next to a vacant lot without any knowledge of brownfields or Philadelphia politics. It was a industrial off load rail yard starting in 1876. A busy coal yard for years with a gas station for the coal trucks. The gas was heavily leaded & other chemicals that are now outlawed. The tanks were filled from the train & coal dumped in brick bins made with mortar containing asbestos. The coal bin were still there & the ground full of bricks from demolished homes. A source water area of a creek was filled & over 100 years of unregulated industry covered the creek the Lenape Indians valued so much. The City & long time neighbors knew the lot was contaminated, but people wanted to make money. They failed to do environmental reports, failed to get permits for demolition of bricks structures, failed to use dust control, failed to get permits for excavation, failed safety measures. But it was politics. Recently a letter from a Senior City Planner surfaced stating that a conspiracy had been engineered against me in the City Council office. I started to get sick with mercury, lead & cadmium poisoning right away, extreme cough & still coughing & ill after 7 years. I kept calling for help. I was so weak I could barely stand & finally barely breath so I went to ER & they helped my breathing & told me to vacate site. 3 doctors told city to remove me. A judge saw these requests, the politicians & community started to taunt me & commit hate crimes against me . Instead of helping me, they secretly trucked away a top layer of contaminated dirt in illegal manner. But it didn't stop there. Asbestos & silica from dust & vapors from petrol & other chemicals don't break down in the soil & they don't break down in the body. I've networked with a number a people now who have been made ill by such things & they are ill for years. Never get well, plus the whistleblower retaliation is extreme abuse and every single one of us has complex PTSD & live in terror. I've had many and ongoing threats & crimes committed against me. The community laughed and left me to die. The threatened jail & to lock me up in mental institutions. This is a very popular way to get rid of