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California Health Professionals Denounce State Senators for Failing to Protect Communities of Color from Air Pollution and COVID-19, Urge them to Support AB 345

California physicians, nurses, and health professionals sent an urgent statement today to the State Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Water calling on them to protect Californians’ health by voting “Yes” on AB 345 (Muratsuchi). In a vote on August 5th, Senators Borgeas, Caballero, Hertzberg, Hueso, and Jones opposed the bill, creating a 5 to 4 majority. The Committee then voted to reconsider the bill. AB 345 would require the California Geological Energy Management Division (CalGEM) to create a buffer zone between oil and gas operations and sensitive sites where people live and play by 2022. An estimated 5.4 million Californians, disproportionately people of color, live within a mile of an oil and gas well.

Frontline health professionals who signed the statement are available to speak with the press. Please contact caclimatehealthnow@gmail.com to arrange an interview.

In their statement, health professionals argue that the COVID-19 pandemic increases the urgency for legislators to act. They write: “there is mounting evidence that in the United States, people exposed to chronic air pollution are more likely to die from COVID-19 than those who breathe cleaner air. In addition, Black and Latinx communities in California, who are suffering disproportionately from COVID-19 deaths relative to white Californians, are also more likely to live within 2500 feet of oil and gas drilling sites.”

Dr. Marc Futernick, MD, an emergency medicine physician who works in Senator Hertzberg’s district agrees: “It is heart-breaking to see patients’ lives cut short by the dreadful combination of pre-existing lung damage caused by air pollution and this horrible virus. The coronavirus and air pollution work together to destroy our lungs. Our State Senators have a chance to remove one of those factors.”

Sarah Schear, MS, a medical student at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine noted: “Passing AB 345 to ensure the creation of a setback between oil and gas extraction and places where Californians live, play and seek care is a vital step to lowering unacceptable racial inequities in environmental health in our state.”

In the letter, health professionals emphasize recently published data on health harms of living near oil and gas wells in California. Dr. Amanda Millstein, MD, a pediatrician in Richmond, CA, said: “Two major studies of large cohorts of pregnant mothers living near oil and gas wells in California found that their babies were more likely to have low birth weight and to be born prematurely. Preterm birth is the leading cause of infant mortality in the United States. We need our State Senators to address the root cause, and to help our patients in a way we cannot.”
David Gonzalez, Stanford scientist and lead author of a 2020 study that focuses specifically on health impacts in the San Joaquin Valley said: “We are increasingly finding that living near oil wells is hazardous, particularly for Hispanic and Black women. We also observed higher levels of particulate matter, one of the most dangerous air pollutants, near oil fields in months where there was more drilling. This evidence raises alarm that living near wells impacts other aspects of health.”

Dr. Vi Nguyen, MD, a pediatrician in San Diego, says Senators Hueso, Caballero and Borgeas in particular should support this bill, since their Imperial and Central Valley districts have the highest rates of COVID-19 infection in the state and both received F's from the American Lung Association for particulate and ozone pollution. “Chronic exposure to air pollution increases the risk of death from COVID-19 and is part of the reason that disproportionately high numbers of Black and Latinx Californians are dying from COVID-19 relative to whites,” she said.

Read the full letter by frontline health professionals to the State Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Water here.