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VITAL SIGNS

ENVIRONMENT. HEALTH. JUSTICE. INLAND EMPIRE



BEYOND THE GROVE

UNDERSTAND HOW ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE INLAND EMPIRE AND CALIFORNIA AS A WHOLE CONTINUE TO PERSIST AND IMPACT RESIDENTS IN THE AREA

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WELCOME TO

VITAL SIGNS

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up the first issue of Vital Signs.

Vital Signs is a student-run digital magazine that connects students with the health and environmental issues surrounding them. Each article focuses on topics with supporting research that impacts UCR and communities in the Inland Empire in an engaging format. As students at UCR, we have seen an increase of warehouses, roads, and neighborhoods being built around us. This, along with rising temperatures, has serious impacts on the health of our communities. Vital Signs aims to bring these issues to light in an engaging and meaningful way.

The most challenging part of creating this magazine was deciding how we wanted to tell the story. We wanted to organize it in a way that made the magazine easy to follow, almost like a story.

By the time you reach the last page, I hope you have a new perspective on how social structures impact environmental equity within different communities in the Inland Empire. We hope you feel a call to action, inspired to create environmental change within your community through action or even joining us in the conversation.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy the first issue of Vital Signs

-Vital Signs Editorial Team

Avika Singh,
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"WE ABUSE THE LAND BECAUSE WE REGARD IT AS A COMMODITY, BELONGING TO US. WHEN WE SEE LAND AS A COMMUNITY TO WHICH WE BELONG, THEN WE MAY BEGIN TO USE IT WITH LOVE AND RESPECT."

- ALDO LEOPOL

FRESH AIR FOR ALL

By Zara Parvez

Warehouses. They make our everyday shopping wishes available and help create jobs that lift up the local economy, but everything comes at a price.

Since 2023, the Inland Empire has added 55 million square feet of warehouses. Riverside and San Bernardino counties ranked highest for the most polluted places to live in the U.S., according to the 2026 "State of the Air" report from the American Lung Association. This ranking comes as a direct result of the increased air pollution these warehouses are creating. Although this industry helps create jobs and economic growth, the disproportionate number of warehouses filling up the Inland Empire is severely degrading the air quality, creating a health crisis for these marginalized communities.

"Is keeping up with the demand of consumerism worth jeopardizing our health?" That is the main question many residents have begun to ask. According to the National Institute of Environmental Health Services, "Air pollution can affect lung development and is implicated in the development of emphysema, asthma, and other respiratory diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Increases in asthma prevalence and severity are linked to urbanization and outdoor air pollution." Alongside the leading cause of the increase in air pollution is the staggering number of warehouses newly built. Without regulations on warehouses, big corporations will continue to build and build until there is no more land for them to take over.

Ozone Ranking	State	County	WA
1	California	San Bernardino	159.2
2	California	Riverside	126.7
3	California	Los Angeles	119.0
4	California	Tulare	92.7
5	California	Kern	75.0
6	Arizona	Maricopa	58.2
7	California	Fresno	54.5
8	Texas	Harris	43.3
9	California	San Diego	37.8
10	Colorado	Jefferson	29.7

Most Polluted Places to Live
American Lung Association
State of the Air 2026 Report

As years passed, Riverside, CA, would become a city where you rarely saw kids outside or at the playground, as the air quality went from excellent to "unsuitable for sensitive groups." One by one, warehouses began to pop up like a game of whack-a-mole, without the part where they eventually disappear again. Instead of only being built in big empty plots, these warehouses are now found close to neighborhoods and schools full of kids, leading to an increase in health problems in younger children.



Smog and large warehouses next to homes in Bloomington, California.
Credit: Jose Ramon Becerra Vera

"The dust aggravates her daughter Kailyn's severe asthma. Kailyn, 14, has been hospitalized about 20 times, including six stays in intensive care. Her last Christmas was spent at Riverside County Regional Medical Center."

-USC Annenberg: Center for Health Journalism

Moving and choosing a permanent home is an important decision for many families, however, they should not be faced with unexpected finances because their city and state did not choose to impose proper regulations on warehouses that were to be built. The USC Annenberg: Center for Health Journalism reports that: "A recent study found that a childhood asthma case in Riverside costs on average $4,000 a year." Not only are warehouses creating numerous health problems, but they are creating a financial burden for these families.

"She said her daughter's hospital bills have been as high as $50,000, but they are covered through the federal Supplemental Security Income program because Kailyn's asthma is so severe she is considered disabled." No child should have to miss out on special moments because of health issues caused by factors out of their control. Warehouses should not be pushing these poor children to a point where their health issues are so bad to be considered incapacitated, let alone having their health issues pushed at all. There are many cases of circumstances similar to this, all being a cry for help; help is needed by these communities to set these regulations in stone to protect not only the people, but especially the children, who have no power to advocate for themselves.

Our world continues to grow more and more as the years go by, and as they do, we must continue to preserve it for the generations ahead. Greater regulations on warehouses are the first step to help create a better world for future generations. It is our responsibility to be the voice for those who cannot use theirs yet. The younger generations of children did not choose to grow up in such circumstances where they risk developing asthma at six years old, so we must do our best to combat and prevent these issues. To create a healthier world, because everyone deserves to breathe fresh air.



FIGURE 1. AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF WILDFIRE SMOKE SPREADING TOWARD RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS IN THE INLAND EMPIRE

Beyond the Flames

By Avika Singh
Photography by Tony Kurzwell

Every day, we find ourselves browsing through hundreds of images on our phones, social media, and news websites. With so much information available online and AI making it easier than ever to create images, capturing our attention with a single photograph can be very difficult. However, some pictures are particularly striking because they convey a story that words cannot.

Many people often associate the danger of wildfires with images of large flames, burning forests, and destroyed homes. However, one of the most impactful consequences shown in this photograph is the large plume of smoke rising over the mountains. As shown in Figure 1, the smoke takes up almost half of the image, making it appear more intense than the flames below it. In addition to its size, the smoke appears to be moving toward houses, showing how it can affect a larger range of people than those who are close to the wildfire itself. Wildfire smoke worsens air quality for the surrounding areas, putting nearby neighborhoods at risk.

The most noticeable part of the photograph is the huge plume of smoke stretching across the mountains, not the flames themselves. The thick gray cloud occupies most of the frame and completely overshadows the wildfire. This is a serious health risk, as smoke carries fine particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$), carbon monoxide, and other harmful pollutants that can travel long distances through the air. $PM_{2.5}$ is especially dangerous because the particles are small enough to travel deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream. Wildfire smoke can account for as much as 25% of $PM_{2.5}$ pollution in the United States, demonstrating how significantly these events can affect air quality. Exposure to wildfire smoke has also been linked to respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular disease, worsening asthma, and other adverse health effects, especially among children, older adults, and individuals with preexisting health conditions (Reid et al.). By emphasizing the smoke rather than the flames, the photograph shows that the most widespread effects of a wildfire are often the harmful pollutants carried in the smoke.

Another important detail in the image is how the smoke crosses the boundary between the mountains and nearby homes. While the actual fire is restricted to the mountains, the smoke travels beyond the natural boundary toward residential communities. Rather than implying that only the burning region is at risk, the photograph emphasizes that individuals outside the evacuation zone may suffer major health effects when air quality deteriorates. This is particularly important in the Inland Empire because it has one of the poorest air quality regions in the country. In 2026, the American Lung Association ranked the Inland Empire as the most polluted metropolitan area in the United States for ozone pollution and one of the worst for year-round particle pollution (Victoria). When wildfire smoke mixes with the existing air pollution, residents have an even greater risk of respiratory illness and other health problems.

Communities do not need to burn in order to suffer the health consequences of a wildfire.

The pollutants in the smoke are especially concerning because air pollution does not affect all people the same way. Children



Photo credit: Allen J. Schaben

are particularly vulnerable because their lungs are still developing and they breathe more air relative to their body size than adults. The EPA explains that exposure to air pollution is linked to childhood asthma and can increase asthma symptoms, emergency room visits, and missed school days (Environmental Protection Agency). The UCR Community Air Quality Project also explains that communities in the Inland Empire face pollution from multiple sources such as freight movement, warehouses, highways, and diesel emissions (Center for Healthy Communities). Wildfire smoke adds to the existing air pollution and increases the public health risks faced by these communities. Individuals with asthma or other chronic respiratory illnesses are also more likely to experience asthma attacks, breathing difficulties, and the need for emergency medical care because of the increased pollution (Environmental Protection Agency).

The photograph helps viewers recognize that wildfire smoke is as, if not more, dangerous than the physical destruction caused by the fire. As smoke spreads outside the burn area, it threatens nearby communities by worsening air quality and increasing the risk of respiratory and cardiovascular disease, particularly in the Inland Empire where many residents already experience poor air quality. As wildfires become increasingly common, protecting public health will involve addressing not only the fires themselves but also the long-term effects of the smoke they leave behind.

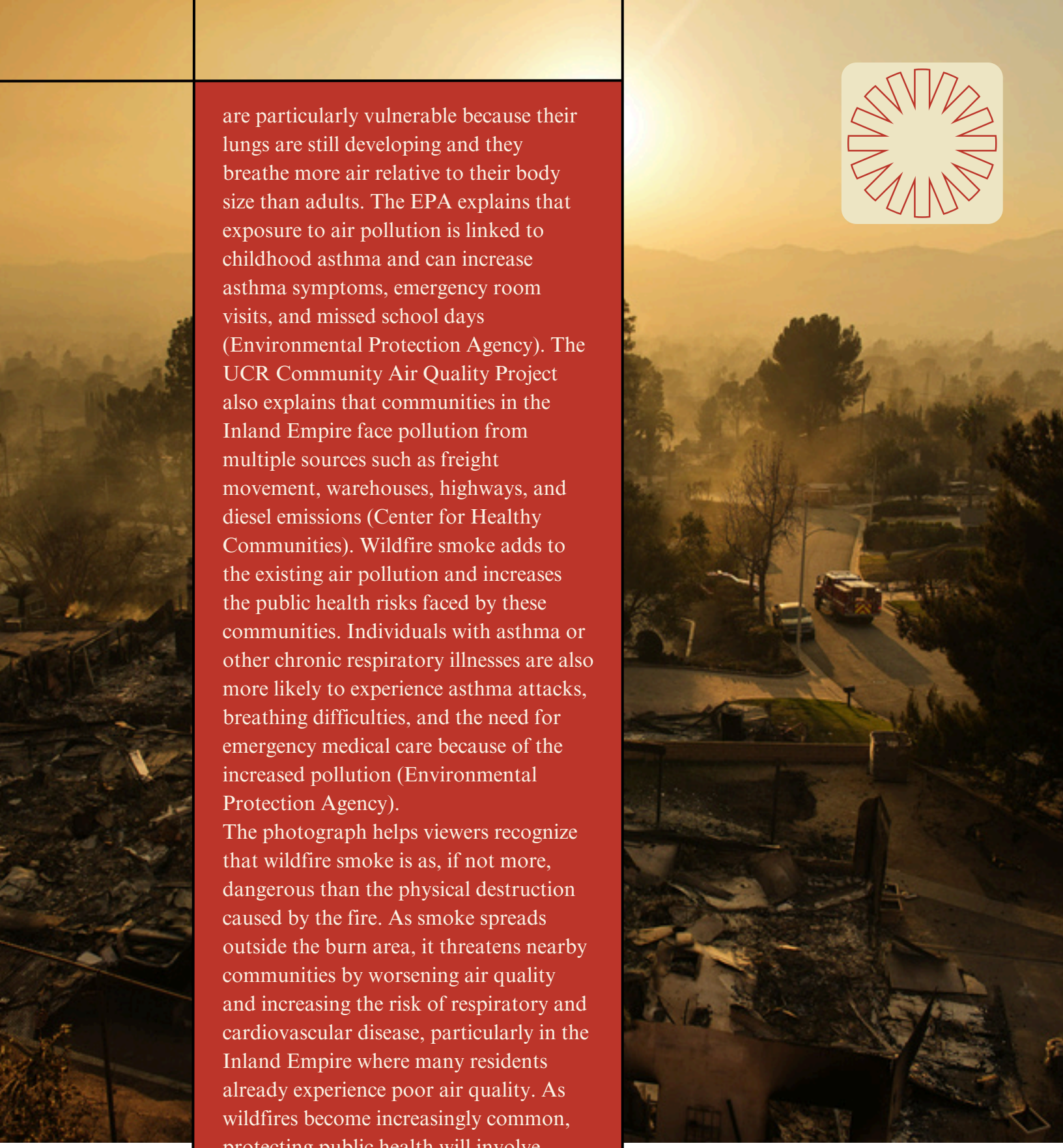


Figure 2: Neighborhood devastated by the Eaton Fire in Altadena, California. **Photo:** John Locher

Clearing the Air: The Industrial Pipeline



BY AIDEN ANGUIANO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NOE MONTES







California has traded citrus groves for toxic smog, and now you're paying for it!

Southern California's Inland Empire used to be known for its miles of citrus groves and farms. Today, these agricultural areas have been removed and replaced by concrete, asphalt, and rows of warehouses.

As online shopping has grown, corporations have flocked to the Inland Empire region, creating an environmental and public health crisis.

According to Mark Takano's *State of Air Quality in California's 39th Congressional District,* more than 100 million square feet of warehouse space was built along Interstate 215 from 2005 to 2022. As these warehouse spaces grew, so did corporate profits; however, local residents are the ones to suffer the consequences.

This has created a tax on Inland Empire residents' health. The working-class communities of color within the Inland Empire are heavily affected by these logistics hubs, as they are built in their communities due to the cheaper land and fewer regulations. Thousands of diesel trucks drive through the neighborhood streets every day, which release hazardous pollutants into the atmosphere, increasing the rates of respiratory illnesses, especially among vulnerable populations like children and the autoimmune.



"The cost of free shipping is being paid for by the families of those in the Inland Empire who have developed health problems from the poor air caused by these warehouses."
— Congressman Mark Takano

This environmental and health crisis is taking money out of your own pockets. Mark Takano finds that it's costing:

- $4,008 per year extra local families are having to pay due to air-pollution health issues
- 7% of the median household income is used on these medical bills
- Cost Riverside $8.5 million dollars annually for asthma treatment due to the air quality



This environmental issue is more than just illnesses and physical costs; it also includes the costs to the children in these communities. Takano highlights that the air pollution also impacts the indoor air quality, which reduces students' abilities to concentrate. This can drop students' academic performance by 9%.

As a result, it damages students' minds, lowers their achievement, and creates a socioeconomic trap. It reduces these students' educational opportunities and pipelines them into these labor-intensive, low-wage, high polluting warehouse jobs, which will further affect their health and their descendants.

This is continuing to grow into a larger issue as Takano notes that "the increasing industrialization of Southern California is contributing to rising air pollution levels." However their are many ways to reclaim our communities' health.

In order to create reform, there needs to be a focus on educating the community but also the consumers who are continuing to use these corporations for fast and free delivery.

Educating the public about the smog, the impacted classrooms, and the impacted health of the residents in these logistics areas helps to create social awareness of these issues. This social awareness can turn to advocacy and protest of current-day policies and regulations.

Policymakers and environmental scientists can then take action and work together to change zoning laws, enforce regulations like buffer zones, push for green energy requirements, and hold corporations accountable. Economic growth cannot come at the expense of human lives.



The Rise of VALLEY FEVER

BY AVIKA SINGH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHEELA DUTT

CALIFORNIA REPORTED A RECORD NEARLY 12,500 VALLEY FEVER CASES IN 2024, MUCH MORE THAN THE USUAL 7,000–9,000 CASES PER YEAR BETWEEN 2017 AND 2023. (CDPH)

People often think of climate change as just environmental changes like rising temperatures, droughts, and wildfires, but its effects also directly impact public health. One major example of this in California is Valley fever, a fungal disease that has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Although the disease has existed for decades, changes in climate, land use, and population growth have created environmental conditions that increase people's exposure to the fungus (California Department of Public Health). Many Californians are still unaware of Valley fever and how changing environmental conditions can increase the risk of diseases like it.

In the past, Valley fever was largely considered a disease limited to California's dry regions, but recent studies suggest it has become a growing public health concern as temperatures continue to increase. Rather than focusing only on the disease itself, this article will explore how California's changing climate and landscape have influenced the spread of Valley fever over time and why raising awareness has become increasingly important.

Valley fever is a fungal infection caused by inhaling spores from the fungus *Coccidoides.* The fungus lives in dry conditions, particularly in the soils of California's Central Valley and parts of Southern California. The spores become airborne when the soil is disturbed by activities such as farming, construction, earthquakes, or strong winds, and they can then be inhaled by people nearby. Unlike illnesses such as COVID-19, Valley fever cannot be spread through physical contact (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Instead, infection depends on exposure to contaminated dust, making environmental conditions an important factor in determining who is at risk. Symptoms of Valley fever include fever, cough, fatigue, chest pain, and muscle aches. These symptoms are similar to a lot of other respiratory illnesses, such as the flu or pneumonia, which can make Valley fever difficult to



diagnose. While most people can recover without major long-term effects, some develop severe infections and require prolonged medical treatment. To avoid this, the illness should be recognized early on, especially for people living or working in areas where the fungus is common (CDCP). Earlier diagnosis can lead to faster treatment and greater awareness among both patients and healthcare providers.

Although Valley fever has existed in California for many years, the environment that it occupies has increased significantly over time, increasing the opportunities for people to be exposed to the fungus. Historically, the most reported cases of Valley fever occurred in the San Joaquin Valley, where the hot, dry climate was the ideal weather for the Coccidoides fungus to thrive in the soil. (CDPH). However, as California's population grew and agriculture and urban development expanded, more people began living and working in areas where the fungus naturally thrives. Increased farming and construction disturbed the soil, which then allowed the fungal spores to become airborne and increased the chance of exposure (CDCP).

In addition to increased human activity, climate change has also altered California's environment in several ways that may increase the risk of Valley fever. Over the past several decades, California has seen higher average temperatures, more frequent droughts, and longer periods of dry weather (Gorris et al.). These weather conditions have contributed to drier soils, making it easier for the dust to become airborne when the ground is disturbed by people. Unlike diseases spread from person to person, Valley fever depends heavily on environmental conditions, making it an important example of how climate change can affect public health. allowing fungal spores to travel easily through the air and then inhaled by people. Unlike diseases spread from person to person, Valley fever depends heavily on environmental conditions, making it an important example of how climate change can affect public health.

Climate change doesn't directly cause Valley fever; it creates the conditions that make exposure far more likely



FIGURE 1: MEDICAL ILLUSTRATION OF COCCIDIOIDES, THE SOIL-DWELLING FUNGUS THAT CAUSES VALLEY FEVER (COCCIDIOIDOMYCOSIS).
ILLUSTRATION: STEPHANIE ROSSOW, MSMI, CDC

Recently, researchers have been studying how changing environmental conditions may influence the spread of Valley fever. In a 2025 study, Weaver et al. found that areas with higher concentrations of fine mineral dust experienced higher rates of Valley fever. The correlation was strongest during hot, dry periods and after wet winters, when the fungus is able to grow before becoming airborne after the soil dries. The study also found that Valley fever cases often increased one to three months after periods of high dust exposure (Weaver et al.).

While Weaver et al. focused on the current relationship between dust exposure and Valley fever, Gorris et al. examined how climate change may affect the disease in the future. The researchers predicted that as the climate became hotter and drier, the geographic range of the fungus could expand beyond the areas where Valley fever is most common, putting more people at risk of exposure (Gorris et al.).

Together, these studies show that Valley fever is not simply a local disease but a growing public health concern. Rather than climate change directly causing the disease, it changes the environmental conditions that increase human exposure to the fungus.

Raising public awareness is one of the most effective ways to reduce and prepare for the impact of Valley fever. Farmworkers, construction workers, and others who spend long hours outdoors are at greater risk because their jobs often involve exposure to dust where the fungus may be present. People with weakened immune systems are also more likely to develop severe infections. Public health agencies such as the California Department of Public Health continue to monitor Valley fever cases, educate healthcare providers, and raise awareness in high-risk communities (CDPH).



FIGURE 2. REPORTED VALLEY FEVER INCIDENCE BY CALIFORNIA COUNTY, 2024.
SOURCE: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH.

As environmental conditions continue to influence California's climate and landscape, understanding their effects on public health will become increasingly important for protecting communities and preparing for future health challenges.



PROTECTING OUR ROOTS

“All we have to do is wake up and change.”
-Greta Thunberg

By Zara Parvez

When we refer to roots, the general idea that comes to people's minds is our ancestry, where we came from, our parents, grandparents, etc. Many people overlook how our true roots connect to the land. The Earth provides materials to build homes, fresh water, food, etc. Every day, we do not consider just how grateful we should be, and so we must begin doing a better job of protecting our roots.

Following the same practices of Native Americans and the way they nurture their relationship with plants and land may help open our eyes and pose the question: "If Mother Earth had the option to take away these things that were gifted to us, would she after seeing what we have given her in return?". There is the profound idea held that plants should not be referred to as simply "plants" but should be addressed as people. If this was the standard for every person, there is no doubt that we would treat a person the same way we have been treating the Earth for decades. Protecting the Earth does not simply mean something as broad as "stop littering" but involves a multi-step plan. From keeping our ocean and beaches clean, to lowering fossil fuels, finding more renewable energy sources, and providing for our native plants. We need to return the gift given to us and heal our relationship with our planet.

Before humans and natives tended to the land, this ecosystem was undisturbed, it was not in danger. Our consumption-driven economy has led to the extinction of multiple beings that walked this Earth before us. We continue to disrupt nature in a way never intended, introducing invasive plant species that affect the health of our native ones. Showing the importance of native plant care and preservation has been proven to be effective and is a further step we can take toward spreading awareness of the help these beings need from us. Our native plants which provide for pollinators such as native bees and hummingbirds. Bee pollination helps nurture and reproduce plants, contributing more than $200 billion yearly to ecological services. Even after that, humans continue to harvest honey from bees, contributing to a market whose size value in 2022 was an estimated $9.01 billion. These markets, from meat, to dairy, to produce, would not be possible without our planet. The Earth has proved time and time again that it is our most valuable source.



"Let us live in a way that Earth will be grateful for us."

-Robin Wall Kimmerer

Native plants are known to be a vital aspect of our land, more complex than simply fruit and vegetables. Plants have a vast history of being used for multiple purposes: making baskets, clothes, providing food for us and other beings, creating leaves into teas, and being used for medicinal purposes. Our job is to keep these sacred gifts safe and utilize them without damaging their ecosystem. Corporations must put more research into how much we could use different plants for multiple purposes. While it may have selfish roots, if it would mean preserving and protecting these native plants from major companies, it may be the stepping stone necessary towards a better and healthier world.

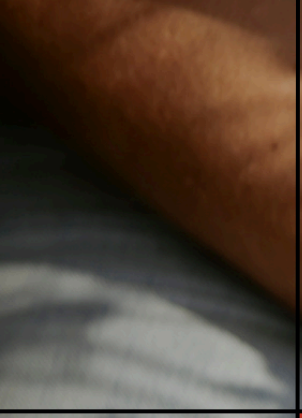
We protect many plants, animals, insects, etc., to help avoid the extinction of these beings. However, the question of whether or not such drastic measures would be necessary had we continued to care for our Earth properly remains a controversial question amongst many. Some may argue that such an outcome was impossible to avoid. In contrast, others may claim that Native Americans could live while protecting our native plants and Earth. Truthfully, had we followed the same practice they did, our world would not currently be in the current state of argument regarding its health and healing. We can all come to the consensus that if we do not start and continue protecting our native roots, Earth will reach a point where she can no longer provide for us.

Saving the world that was created before we were here is the only way we can continue living on the glory that is Mother Earth. Our roots reach beyond ancestry and the countries of our origin. It is the land where we walk, live, and breathe. We have to protect our hearts the same way we would any of our family. We are grateful for the Earth, but we must live in a way where the Earth would also be thankful for us.



Voices from the Grove

First hand testimonials from real people living in the Inland Empire



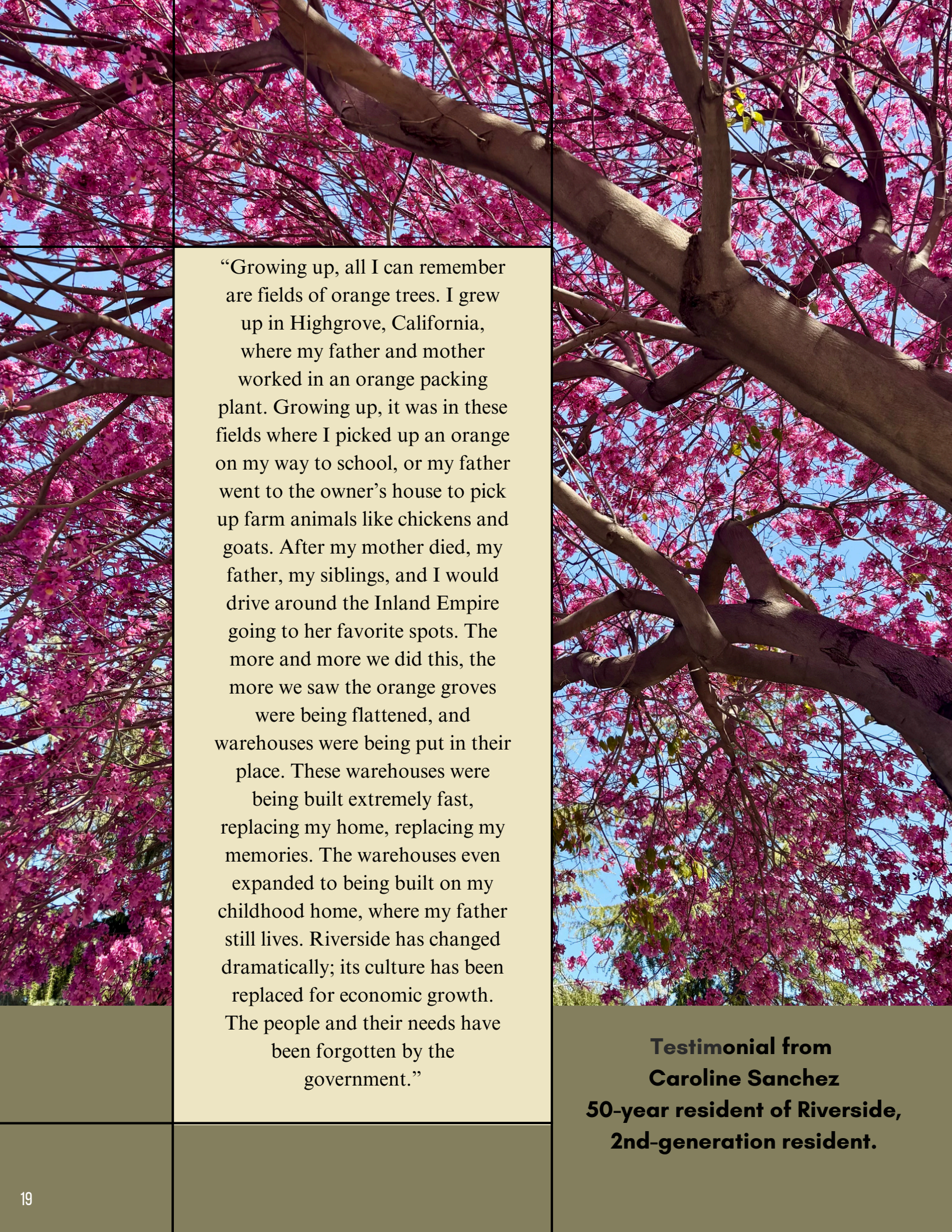






"I can no longer find an article I read when I was younger regarding the World Logistics Center and how it would affect Moreno Valley's air quality. It was about how not far from Moval, there is another city that suffers greatly from warehouse pollution. I can't remember the name of that city or who published this article, but I do remember the image of a family having to use an air purifier in their home to even breathe fresh air. Even though it has been a long time since I read about this, it made me notice more about how poor our air quality is in Moreno Valley. I especially noticed when I would check the weather, since it's so rare that the air quality index isn't presented to warn that it's "Poor-unsafe for certain groups". Recently, I've moved back home from Santa Barbara where that warning was nonexistent, so it's strange to have this constant reminder that the surroundings around us that the air in a way is suffocating us and affecting many of our community members' health issues."

Testimonial from Jocelyn Gomez.
Long time Moreno Valley resident.



"Growing up, all I can remember are fields of orange trees. I grew up in Highgrove, California, where my father and mother worked in an orange packing plant. Growing up, it was in these fields where I picked up an orange on my way to school, or my father went to the owner's house to pick up farm animals like chickens and goats. After my mother died, my father, my siblings, and I would drive around the Inland Empire going to her favorite spots. The more and more we did this, the more we saw the orange groves were being flattened, and warehouses were being put in their place. These warehouses were being built extremely fast, replacing my home, replacing my memories. The warehouses even expanded to being built on my childhood home, where my father still lives. Riverside has changed dramatically; its culture has been replaced for economic growth. The people and their needs have been forgotten by the government."

Testimonial from
Caroline Sanchez
50-year resident of Riverside,
2nd-generation resident.



Provoke Culture x Sergio Maciel for Patagonia Chicago and NRDC

MACIEL, S., & PROVOKE CULTURE. (2020). IN A SEGREGATED CHICAGO, ART PUTS ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM ON DISPLAY [DIGITAL ARTWORK]. PATAGONIA CHICAGO AND NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL. SERGIO MACIEL PORTFOLIO [1]

How Artwork Makes an Impact

PROVOKE CULTURE

BY AIDEN ANGUIANO

"ART IS NOT A MIRROR HELD UP TO REALITY, BUT A HAMMER WITH WHICH TO SHAPE IT." - BERTOLT BRECHT (1920)

Art is an informative way to make complex social issues into a symbolic piece. The art piece by Provoke Culture x Sergio Maciel does exactly this, showing the multifaceted social structures that are allowing environmental injustice within our communities to occur.

The art piece uses contrasts to show the unfairness of these issues, which is shown through how the center of the image is split into two parts. On the left side of the art piece, there is a young white boy who is blowing bubbles in a park with plenty of green spaces. However, in contrast, on the right side, there is a young Black girl wearing a respirator mask in an industrial site with a dark, polluted sky and piles of trash behind her.

This contrast highlights the socioeconomic disparities within these environmental health issues. In most cases, high-polluting industries, such as landfills or warehouses, are built in BIPOC working-class communities, such as here in Riverside.

Beyond the main circle, the surrounding images are filled with images of people who need help and are protesting the environmental injustice that is occurring. On the left side, a pregnant woman is holding her stomach, with a sign that reads “Vivir”, which means to live. On the right side of the art piece, there is a Black community protesting the health impacts of the environmental harm. There is a Black pregnant woman holding her stomach, and an individual underneath her holding a sign that states “I have asthma”.

This art piece is not fictional, but is a connection to what is happening here in the Inland Empire. With the continuing expansion over the past decades of mega-warehouses, neighborhoods and fields of land are being replaced with logistics hubs. Just like the images in the art piece of individuals living in smog and industrial areas, the residents of the Inland Empire are being choked out by heavy industry.

The art piece shows the cost of this industrial expansion in the Inland Empire, with the rise of respiratory illnesses as well as the disproportionate impact on BIPOC working-class families. However, it also leaves us with a message of protest and community resistance. Community groups and families are organizing and protesting for cleaner air and stricter regulations on industry. The art reminds us that clean air should not depend on where you live, and that we must advocate for a future where every child is able to breathe clean air and blow bubbles safely.



VITAL SIGNS