

Audio Podcast about the Symposium on the Science of Disproportionate Environmental Health Impacts

WILMA SUBRA: My name is Wilma Subra. I provide technical assistance to the Louisiana Environmental Action Network on a whole host of environmental issues. I also provide that type of technical assistance to community groups throughout the United States.

CHRISTINE GUITAR: What paper were you responding to, Wilma?

WILMA SUBRA: And, the paper that I was involved in responding to dealt with the differential vulnerabilities and susceptibilities that are needed to expand the scope of doing risk assessments. The information contained in the paper is critical to the community groups that I work with across the United States.

One of the things is that a number of these communities have an elevated body burden level of chemicals that they are being exposed to and, for the most part, the body burden levels that are present in these communities is not evaluated and so they are much more vulnerable and susceptible to risk. However, it's not taken into account when they determine the risk levels that are present in the community.

In addition, a lot of the communities I work with are subsistence hunters and fishers. On the national level, you'll hear about a lot of communities that actually fish and consume contaminated fish. But in the communities I work with, it's not only the fish that are contaminated but the crustaceans, the mammals and the birds. These communities have no other source of food except the contaminated fish, crustaceans, mammals and birds. So it's a decision they have to make whether to eat contaminated fish or whether to not have anything to put on the plates of their families in their homes.

So these are the issues that, when you start looking at the vulnerabilities and the susceptibility, that is critical to include in a risk assessment.

In addition, in Louisiana, there's been a new movement afoot where the environmental justice communities, which are the fence lines of polluting facilities, welcome in new industries and the expanding of existing industry facilities in exchange for a promise of jobs and financial resources. This is going on at facilities dealing with vinyl chloride manufacturing, also the release of known human cancer-causing agents, steel manufacturing facilities, petroleum refineries, and industrial waste landfills. The community asks nothing in return like reduction of risk, reduction of emissions, and they make the decision for the entire community, which then becomes very vulnerable and the risks increase.

So, this is very troubling as we're trying to identify better mechanisms of evaluating risk and then you have these communities welcoming in additional risks. So the paper that we've been dealing with is really critical to improving the health and the welfare of these fence line communities.

We really appreciate the opportunity to participate in this process.