KEEN Launches Reporting System

By Berenice Sanchez
South Kern Sol, Thursday, May 3, 2012

BAKERSFIELD–Community advocates and government agencies joined forces to launch the website that will allow community members and environmental advocates to report environmental and health hazards they see on May 1.

The KEEN (Kern Environmental Enforcement Network) website is sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and The California Endowment. KEEN was modeled after Imperial County's successful reporting tool IVAN (Imperial Visions Action Network).

"Imperial County's IVAN collected 44 reports (which led to $90,000) in environmental fines," said Sarah Aivd, from Californians for Pesticide Reform. "Part of those fines are directed to the community for programs for the environment."

The 'environmental hazard-tracking' system is will be used in Kern County by anyone to report a problem or hazard.

"We work with a lot of different agencies, getting into the fields, into the communities to get out this information," said Aivd. "There are a lot of barriers they (the community members) face. They might see someone at 2 a.m.; this is designed to address those issues."

KEEN can be accessed multiple ways: Online on the KEEN website (www.KernReport.org), through email, texting with or without pictures to (303) 800-8307, or by calling on the phone number (661) 379-0411 and leaving a detailed voice message. Whichever method is chosen, they can all be accessed 24 hours a day."

Kern County is part of the Central Valley, so it's not surprising, especially in South Kern, to notice the rows upon rows of fields and the offensive smells. The smells come from pesticides strayed onto the surrounding fields or from the dairy farms.

"I think this program will be a great tool for the communities to report all the hazards that are in the communities," said Gustavo Aguirre, an organizing director from the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment (CRPE). "From air quality to water quality, we are suffering from pollution. Our children are suffering from pollution."

In Arvin, CRPE brought air quality testing buckets. Aguirre said he was upset the findings.

"Ten different chemicals were found in the dust," he said. "Two of them are above the state limit."

With residents having the opportunity to report hazards such as those, all of Kern County can work together to become healthier and safer. Any concerns or hazards can be reported to KEEN, who'll then direct them to the proper enforcers to fix the problems as soon as possible. Problems like drifting pesticides, flooding, unsafe workplaces, and agricultural burning to illegal trash dumping of any substance, odors from dairies, and damaged roadways, with KEEN reporting is just a click or call away.

"Just the fact that we're able to report, it'll allow the community to be more effective in helping the government enforce those violations," said Aguirre.

Within KEEN's first meeting in March, results have already been made. Residents from Weedpatch were able to get Kern Regional Transit to build a bus shelter, so that the people in the community are able to have a safe bus stop onto which they can use.

Everyone seemed thrilled about the new KEEN tool that will allow community members and environmental advocates to safely, quickly and anonymously report violations. Language barriers will not be a problem, nor will accessibility.

"KEEN provides an easy way to file reports," said Tracey Brieger, from Californians for Pesticide Reform. "This is a significant step to greater change."

"As a result of that, our air and water pollution will be minimized. We'll have a positive input in our communities," added Aguirre.

Big labor faces dissension in wake of Fresno County strike
The Fresno Bee Wed., May 2, 2012

Fresno County's largest labor union continues to face internal strife as a result of the January labor strike.

A group of county social workers, angry that the union didn't accomplish more with the three-day walk-off, is fighting to remove themselves and more than 900 co-workers from the Service Employees International Union.

Last week, county job specialist Kandy Gonzalez registered the independent Fresno County Employees Association, an initial step toward giving employees in the Department of Social Services a new group to provide them representation.

"We know we can't stay with these people. We don't trust them, and they don't represent us well," Gonzalez said.

The Department of Social Services is the county government's biggest department. If employees vote to split from SEIU, it would significantly dilute the local chapter's membership and funding.

The chapter currently represents about 4,100 county workers.

A group of correctional officers at the County Jail is similarly trying to break from SEIU. Union representatives downplayed dissention in their ranks. They said protest in the Social Services Department is isolated. They also said it is misdirected.

"I think people are frustrated by our 9% salary cut and they're upset about a lot of things and they don't know what to do," said Shirley Dillard, an eligibility worker in the department and a union steward. "They're blaming the union. They should be blaming the Board of Supervisors."
The union went on strike Jan. 23 because of wage reductions and other unfavorable contract terms imposed on them by county supervisors.
Supervisors have made no concessions since the strike, but SEIU is pursuing a complaint against the county with the state labor board. The labor board has not said when it might rule on the complaint.

"If we can stand strong together it will be to our advantage," Dillard said. But "this is exactly what the county wants: the members to fight amongst each other."

SEIU lost another local group of employees last week. About 250 workers with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District voted to leave the union and represent themselves.

"The whole mentality of SEIU, the us-against-management approach, doesn't work," said Sheraz Gill, an air district employee.