

The 411: Community watchdogs text for change

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Afraid or unsure of who to call about illegal pesticide spraying? Polluters beware: one California county may have found a solution.

The [Kern Environmental Enforcement Network](#) (KEEN) is an innovative tool that employs texting and web technology to expand the enforcement capacity of government agencies with the help of alert community members. KEEN enables residents to provide anonymous eyewitness accounts of local problems quickly and accurately, 24 hours a day in both English and Spanish. And it works.

Kern County is in the heart of California's central valley, where industrial agriculture dominates the landscape and the economy. Tractors kick up dust, an endless stream of trucks spew diesel emissions into the air, oil refineries emit greenhouse gases. Pesticides are applied day and night by airplane, orchard blaster and shank injection. The almost 26 million pounds of pesticides applied in the county in 2010 makes Kern the second highest pesticide using county in California — and likely the nation. Not surprisingly, Kern is also distinguished by having some of the worst air quality in the country.

Kern's high population of low-income people and people of color — including many [farmworkers](#) — are on the frontlines of exposure to all of these pollutants, with [children](#) bearing the brunt of harmful health impacts. It is truly a hotbed of environmental injustice: the west coast, agricultural version of Louisiana's Cancer Alley.

[Californians for Pesticide Reform \(CPR\)](#) launched the innovative watchdog project in collaboration with government agencies and community advocates in early May. Navigating local, state and federal government agencies can be complicated and intimidating. CPR created KEEN because community members were asking for a more accessible reporting system to address environmental and public health hazards in Kern County. CPR and its partner groups, including PAN — a longtime CPR steering committee member — hope the successful model will be replicated elsewhere.

With better reporting, victories come quick

With nearly instant reporting, changes on the ground have come quickly. Already the Kern Environmental Enforcement Network (KEEN) has been influential in solving on-the-ground problems reported by community members. For example, on March 29th, when a school bus in Bakersfield transporting children to school was sprayed by a crop duster, a resident knew to report it to KEEN. As a result, both the pesticide applicator and the pilot were fined (\$30,000 and \$2,000 respectively). This type of incident is far too common and would otherwise go virtually unnoticed, leaving both applicator and pilot without consequences.

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Other notable victories as a result of KEEN include:

- Commitment from the Kern County Department of Agriculture to establish a 24-hour voicemail in English and Spanish so community members can leave complaints of pesticide drift or exposure after business hours;
- Five new bus shelters installed in Kern County to protect children from air pollution; and
- Exploration launched of alternative water sources for a trailer park with contaminated drinking water in the community of Weedpatch.

"KEEN is the future of reporting environmental problems," said Gustavo Aguirre, Organizing Director at Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, a CPR member organization. He continued:

Using popular technology makes seeking solutions to local pollution problems easy and accessible to everyone. We need clean air and water to protect the health of Kern County communities, especially children.

Take Action » To report a problem, Kern County residents can file anonymous reports in English or Spanish (1) online at www.kernreport.org (2) by sending a text message to 303-800-8312, (3) by leaving a voicemail at (661)379-0411, or (4) by emailing reports@kernreport.org. The reports are quickly directed to the relevant government agency and solved in a monthly task force meeting between agencies and the public in Bakersfield.

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