

## Testimony and Insight

Lower Umatilla Basin GroundWater Management Area (LUBGWMA)



**Organization:** Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides

**Communities Supported:** Underserved Hispanic/Latino rural communities of Morrow & Umatilla, Eastern Oregon

### Name of person providing testimony:

- Tommy Diaz: *Bilingual Healthy People & Communities Program Manager*
- Ana Elisa Wilson: *Equity, Healthy Communities & Environment Program Specialist*

My name is Tommy Diaz and I'm joined by my colleague and friend Ana Elisa Wilson. On behalf of the Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP) we appreciate the opportunity to share our insights and experiences as a community based organization involved in the LUBGWMA project.

NCAP was formed in 1977 born from numerous community-based groups working on aerial pesticide spraying issues in public forestlands. Our mission is to protect community and environmental health and inspire the use of ecologically sound solutions to reduce the use of pesticides. We have over time adapted the focus of our work and expanded our regional focus serving both rural and urban communities throughout Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

It wasn't until 2019 that NCAP established our bilingual programs, with projects that focused on hispanic, Latinx identifying Spanish speaking communities. Given that these communities are most vulnerable to pesticide exposure, this was a necessary step in order to be true to our mission. This was also a big step considering that NCAP was a historically white organization, mostly serving white people.

Even though they started slow and as a small part of our organizational work, the 2020's have seen our bilingual programs take off and gain momentum. Thanks to the onboarding of Hispanic native Spanish speakers, NCAP has been able to establish solid partnerships with on-the-ground, Latine-led organizations and reach wider audiences.

We currently work with those who work and live in close proximity to pesticides and chemicals that are harmful to frontline families, communities and environments. We host listening

sessions, open discussions, educational workshops with those most affected, in order to craft our work plans around their most urgent needs.

Our bilingual programs are divided into two at the moment: the **Latinx Landscaper Network** and the **Farm Worker Education Project**. The first one is an established network of contacts between landscaping professionals and experts in sustainable lawn care management based around the Portland Metro Area. NCAP hosts workshops and outreach events where we share our best management practices and sustainability tips with the hispanic communities that are closer to chemical pesticides and professional landscaping as well as helping those who want to access this business.

The Farm Worker Education Project is ever expanding in Central and Eastern Oregon, and is currently working on making its way to Southwest Washington and Western Idaho counties. Through this program NCAP has direct contact with farm worker families and rural latinx communities in counties like Umatilla, Morrow, Hood River and Malheur, where some people are severely underserved and in need of assistance to cope with pesticide exposure and climate crisis effects.

This program also has the innovation of including non-Spanish speaking Latinx populations, as a response to part of the community's needs. Through our partnerships with community leaders and organizations we are able to have live interpretation for our workshops for indigenous Central American languages such as Maya mam from Guatemala.

For both of these programs NCAP partners with direct-service organizations with vast experience in the needs of these target populations. Only through a well-connected network of multicultural helping organizations are we able to provide the best possible service and aid to our target communities.

Within our Farm Worker Education Project, we have been supporting the work of the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area (LUBGWMA) project alongside Oregon Health Authority (OHA) and Morrow and Umatilla's Department of Health (DOH).

Through this work we have seen first-hand how residents are exposed to contaminated waters where the Nitrate levels are way above the legally acceptable levels. Any amount above 10 mg/L is unsafe for drinking or even cooking, given that boiling doesn't get rid of the toxic compounds. This is what these communities live with on a daily basis. They may use this water safely for bathing, washing dishes, clothes and lawn maintenance; but this water, if consumed

for an extended period, may cause: respiratory infections, thyroid problems and some forms of cancer.

Our on-the-ground work has shown that there needs to be a more drastic approach to dealing with this issue, which has been growing for years now in Central Oregon. We have contributed to the efforts to test the well waters and distribution of purified water for human and pet consumption and are joined by several organizations that are making good progress for these families.

Collective efforts need to be incremented in order to address the reality of this widespread issue. These counties are inhabited by latinx farm worker families that work in industries like dairy, food processing, manufacturing and field work. These communities are not only regularly exposed to chemical pesticides, but they also need the water they harvest in order to grow and cook their produce. These chemicals are now proven to filter through the soil into the waterways, making the well water a toxic cocktail.

Through our partnered work we have identified the needs for reducing the contamination levels of the well water in Umatilla and Morrow counties. This is an issue that has been going on for several years and it hasn't been properly addressed by the competent authorities.

Our on-the-ground experience has provided us with concerning testimonies from the affected communities. There's cases of people who had to wait for 3 or 4 days for their water to be delivered, as well as residential areas where the help hasn't even arrived yet. Some residents made the decision to stop drinking the well water even before it was tested and spend their own funds to buy drinking water for their household and pets.

NCAP's radio show "Raíces Resilientes: Voces del campo", has also proven to contribute to informing rural Latinx families around Oregon and Washington. One family in Morrow county assured they contacted their Health Departments per NCAP's suggestion during one of our transmissions. This resulted in them getting proper assistance and guidance. We also received calls of people asking about water distribution centers and also about mid to long term solutions to this issue.

Community members have also shared their lack of trust in federal agencies and feel more comfortable when the organizations that reach out to them are run by fellow hispanics and in their native language.

NCAP has thought of some suggestions moving forward to be considered for the short term of this project. One is to increase the distribution of drinking water and have government agencies take responsibility for this duty. This could be done through the distribution of stipends or coupons for purchasing water. In addition, if there are pets or cattle at home, this support should be even bigger.

We also insist that in addition to testing for nitrates in the water, a procedure to measure the presence of chemical pesticides should be included. This is a compounded issue if the people use the water for growing their crops and produce. Another suggestion is to install better drainage systems and include filters that may clean the well water to a drinking level.

Concerns from the affected communities also lead us to insist on getting financial assistance for ranch owners or people with pets and cattle, so that their animals may get proper testing to make sure they're not severely affected by the unsanitary conditions of the water.

This task is bigger than anticipated, hence the need for more streams of funding and support for the organizations doing the work. More funding will help us serve these communities better and eventually expand this work to other counties in need.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We hope our testimony has been of help to you. Don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.