

# Rural California Report

Newsletter of the California  
Institute for Rural Studies



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## Environmental justice: young movement meets the Clinton administration at conference

*Text and photo by Don Villarejo*

**BBB** IN WHAT APPEARS TO BE A HOPEFUL SIGN FOR A MORE COMPREHENSIVE national toxics policy, the Clinton Administration brought together hundreds of community-based toxic activists for the first-ever Symposium on Health Research and Needs to Ensure Environmental Justice. Organizers of the event — held in February in Arlington, VA — reported approximately 1,100 participants, ranging from government officials and scientists to victims of toxic poisoning.

The environmental justice movement crystalized at the Environmental Justice Summit held more than two years ago. Leaders of the summit captured the attention of the American public for the first time with the now well-established fact: People of color occupy the frontlines of environmental risk. Whether they are farm workers exposed to agricultural chemicals, uranium miners working among radioactive minerals, or African-American families living in the chemical plumes of the Gulf Coast petrochemical industry, people of color are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards.

What made the conference especially noteworthy was that government organizers arranged to pay travel and lodging expenses for roughly three hundred activists — mostly people of color — from all over the United States. Farm worker leaders from California, Texas, Florida, and Arizona were joined by African-American urban activists; Native American uranium miners met with Asian-American garment workers; and petrochemical workers from the Gulf states swapped experiences with Puerto Rican activists.

The activists seized this extraordinary opportunity for networking. Roughly one hundred informally organized caucus meetings took place over the three days of the symposium. Intense discussions could be overheard in every nook and cranny of the Crystal City Marriott hotel, site of the conference.



Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Jr., head of the NAACP and keynote speaker.

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*Rural California Report* is a quarterly publication of the California Institute for Rural Studies. CIRS is an independent non-profit research and advocacy group which has studied rural issues and policies since 1977. The institute's goal is to build a society that is ecologically balanced, socially just, and economically sustainable. Toward those objectives, CIRS conducts research and public education projects, and works with individual activists in rural communities.

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**JUSTICE, cont. from front page**

The formal symposium agenda included plenary sessions which addressed the central health issues of the environmental justice movement, as well as core group sessions which cut across geographic and issue lines. In the latter sessions, twenty small groups of scientists, policymakers, and activists met for several hours each of the three days to develop specific recommendations for action. These recommendations will be published as part of the conference proceedings.

For this participant, one of the highlights of the gathering was the predominance of people of color among the plenary speakers: government agency heads, scientists, and community leaders. Keynote speaker Rev. Benjamin Chavis, Jr., executive director of the NAACP, brought everyone to their feet with a ringing appeal: Only through environmental justice can we truly save and restore the earth. It is no longer acceptable for environmentalists to call for saving birds, plants, and other wildlife while ignoring the poisoning of people of color. Environmental organizations need to adapt to this new reality and include significant numbers of people of color among their staffs.

Dr. Gerald Poje, of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, and Prof. Bunyan Bryant served as conference co-facilitators, bringing their vast experience with environmental issues and the environmental justice movement to the symposium. They recruited a diverse group of forty activists, scientists, and policymakers from across the nation to serve as core group facilitators who provided daily feedback on the feelings of conference participants.

By the end of the first day's sessions, feedback from the core group facilitators had altered the originally planned agenda. Instead of continuing with speeches in the plenary session of the second day, Carol Browner, director of the Environmental Protection Agency, was asked to respond to statements and questions presented in an "open-mike" session.

One after another, the activists proceeded to tell their stories of poisoning, illness, and neglect by authorities. As the anger and pain spilled out, Browner appeared visibly shaken and promised to convey to the President what she had heard. After more than 90 minutes of hearing people's stories she was asked what activists should do to get the government to respond. She replied, "Continue to make your demands. Speak out even more loudly, and force the agencies to listen to your concerns."

In effect, she was asking the activists to keep up — even step up — the pressure for environmental justice. Clearly, with such demands emerging from the community she will have a stronger hand within the Clinton administration.

For more information contact Dr. Gerald V. Poje, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, PO Box 12233, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709. ♦

**LETTERS**

*Rural California Report* welcomes letters from its readers. If you have a comment, criticism or suggestion, we would like your feedback. Address correspondence to: California Institute for Rural Studies, RCR/Letters to the Editor, PO Box 2143, Davis CA 95616. Letters will be published in future issues of RCR as space permits.