

Interview Wendall Chin San Francisco Bay Activist

Wendall Chin is an organizer with the San Francisco Bay Advocates for Environmental Rights (SAFER!), a grassroots organization fighting toxic pollution of San Francisco Bay. SAFER! works with immigrant workers, people of color, and low-income communities, many of whom fish the Bay for food and recreation and are directly threatened by pollution of the Bay. NELC's ongoing suit against Shell Oil addresses one of the Bay's more serious problems, selenium pollution. NELC spoke with Mr. Chin about the impact of selenium and other toxic chemicals on San Francisco Bay and Bay Area residents.

Describe SAFER!'s role in fighting the pollution of the Bay.

Many environmental groups fight pollution of the Bay in different ways. SAFER!'s particular role is in organizing a grassroots, community-based response to the threat of toxic pollution. Our members are people who have fished the Bay for food and fun, and also people who live in the area. We bring in immigrant workers, communities of color and low-income communities in our work.

Describe the state of San Francisco Bay.

The Bay is one huge toxic hot spot; it's dirty and polluted. Years of research by Citizens for a Better Environment reveal that there are more than 35 areas of toxic concern throughout the Bay. Portions of the Bay are federally designated

toxic hot spots under the Clean Water Act and numerous Superfund sites exist throughout the area. There are more than 300 industrial dischargers and 50 sewage treatment plants poisoning the Bay, with more than 30,000 pounds of 65 toxic pollutants dumped into the Bay daily. Health warnings have been issued by the government advising people not to eat fish and/or animals due to toxic poisoning.

What problems are your members experiencing because of this pollution?

Toxic contamination can have acute and chronic effects on the human body. People who have been eating toxic fish for many years might not realize that the reason why their kids aren't learning so well in school could be due to increased levels of mercury in their system. Some SAFER! members and other folks on the fishing piers have experienced skin rashes, upset stomachs and slight dizziness at times. Some members have stopped fishing, even though they had planned to sell the fish to make money or had given it away to people in the community as food. Others continue to fish, but with more caution and less frequency.

What problems are being found with Bay fish?

Some people have been catching fish with tumors, lesions, sores and worms, as well as fish that have a



"gasoline" smell once cut open. One of our demands has been for the government to test the fish that people catch and eat for toxics. The government has now agreed to and begun conducting these tests, which will examine 6 types of fish for more than 24 chemicals.

What can be done about the state of San Francisco Bay?

We believe that you need to go to the source of the problem, which is the polluters. SAFER! believes that polluters need to be accountable to local communities. This means they must meet the demands of the communities — clean up all toxic chemicals that enter our Bay; provide short-term loans for small businesses that don't have the resources to implement advanced clean-up measures; allow for community participation in the plans and focus on prevention of pollution from the source. People should also get involved in local efforts that demand accountability from polluters. ♦

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