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Imperial Valley environmental health summit looks to cultivate leaders

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Imperial Valley Press

Posted: Saturday, November 2, 2013 11:55 pm

By **JULIO MORALES**, Staff Writer and Copy Editor | [1 comment](#)

Posted on November 2, 2013
by [Julio Morales](#)



IMPERIAL — The Salton Sea and local air quality loomed large at the fifth annual Imperial Valley Environmental Health Leadership Summit. Just as evident was a dedicated effort by a variety of stakeholders to meet the environmental health challenges posed by the sea and impacted air quality.

Yet, much needs to be done, particularly at the local level, organizers said.

“We need leadership, policy and advocacy to come from here,” said Luis Olmedo, director of Comite Civico del Valle, Inc., which hosted the summit.

The summit was an effort to combat the lack of information that often exists in communities that are most impacted by environmental health hazards.

All too often it is communities of color that are the most impacted, said Assemblyman V. Manuel Pérez, D-Coachella.

“Environmental advocates have shown that that is no accident,” he said.

Pointing to recent state legislation that focuses on [improving](#) the health of the New River and the Salton Sea, Pérez noted the importance of grassroots efforts in advancing reform. To be effective, grassroots advocacy and public policy need to work in tandem.

“That’s how we’re going to transform communities,” Pérez said.

Saturday’s summit at Imperial Valley College had also featured a number of speakers on a variety of subjects dealing with environmental health and justice.

“We believe environmental and social justice go hand-in-hand,” said Leticia Ayala, associate director of San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition’s healthy kids campaign.

The 33-year-old bi-national organization works in the San Diego and Tijuana areas and has had success pushing for land use reforms that better protect the health of families in low-income areas.

The secret to their success has been the use of promotores, or community outreach workers, Ayala said. To foster community change, one must tap into the energies of these natural-born leaders. Doing so helps marginalized groups rethink what it means to be a leader. Too often, communities of color tend to equate “leaders” with the same policy makers and authorities who have long neglected the needs of such



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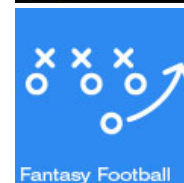
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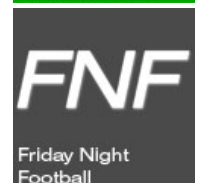
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communities.

"We have to take ownership of that word," she said.

The slow realization that he was capable of enacting local change prompted Ivan Soto to give back to the community, even though he sometimes has his doubts.

"I sometimes wonder if I'm making a difference," Soto, who spoke during a workshop titled "Resisting Toxicity 101: Tools for Change," said.

For the past several years the 26-year-old has been involved in community service projects and has founded a local chapter of the 7 Day volunteer group. The idea came about after constantly having to listen to friends complain about the current state of affairs in the Valley.

Despite being busy with [school](#), work and club activities, Soto remains committed to community service.

"It's overwhelming, but I know it's going to pay off eventually," he said.

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