



August 9, 2010 – Eugene, OR – For Immediate Release

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EPA recognizes work of local environmental organization with grant award

Oregon Toxics Alliance, with its community partner, Centro LatinoAmericano, is the recipient of a \$25,000 US Environmental Justice grant award. The award will help the two organizations collaborate to solve the problems of disproportionate air pollution exposures in the West Eugene industrial corridor neighborhood. OTA and Centro will launch on-the-ground efforts to engage Latino and low income communities in environmental health initiatives through the lens of human rights.

“These grants are very competitive, so we are honored to have our work recognized by the nation’s Environmental Protection Agency,” said OTA Executive Director Lisa Arkin. “OTA and Centro have a strategic plan to get the community involved in local environmental and public health issues.”

According to the EPA, the purpose of an Environmental Justice grant is to support and empower communities working on solutions to local environmental and public health issues. The grant helps collaborative community partners carry out public education activities, do research and host community events – all towards the goal of making positive changes to public health policies. Activities include a number of events, from workshops in asthma care, to door-to-door surveys, to workshops on “do-it-yourself” easy car maintenance to reduce vehicle emissions.

Oregon Toxics Alliance is a statewide, grassroots environmental advocacy protection organization with a history of supporting community efforts to reduce toxic pollution and change government policies on toxic chemicals. Centro LatinoAmericano is a bilingual, multicultural social services agency with the mission of empowering the Latino community in Lane County.

OTA and Centro began to work together after last year's announcement that Seneca Sawmill planned to build a biomass incinerator in West Eugene. They were united over concern that the burner's toxic emissions would worsen existing air pollution problems.

"We are concerned because residents in low income neighborhoods surrounded by heavy industry often report they have trouble breathing because of smelly air," said Marcela Mendoza, Executive Director of Centro LatinoAmericano. "This grant will support our plan to go door-to-door and ask people 'how do you feel' and 'what do you know about the air you breathe?'"

OTA has been tackling the issue of polluted air and water in many Oregon communities since 2001. Locally, the group brought attention to the contaminated ground water and air from decades of pollution at the Eugene Union Pacific rail yard. OTA has actively supported the Eugene's Toxics Right to Know program and educates people about the effects of unhealthy local air.

Centro LatinoAmericano offers crisis intervention, case management, and referrals to Latino families, particularly those who are among the working poor. About one-third of Centro's clients live in west Eugene.

"The EPA Environmental Justice grant supports the work we do to make our community more sustainable and healthy," said Arkin.

Additional Contacts for Interviews:

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