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Toxic dust

Toxic dust and asthma plague Salton Sea communities

Written by Ian James. Photos and videos by Zoë Meyers and Jay Calderon.



Kaylee Pineda likes to be outdoors. She rides her bike, plays Little League baseball and enjoys swinging on the monkey bars at school.

But when the wind picks up and the air turns hazy, she knows she needs to stay indoors. The dust can suddenly trigger her asthma and leave her gasping for air.

“I feel like my chest tightens,” Kaylee said. “My heart starts pumping.”

Kaylee, who is 9 years old, uses an inhaler every morning before going to school and every night before going to bed. Sometimes, when her chest hurts and she struggles to breathe despite the medication, her mother drives her to the hospital.

A serious asthma crisis is afflicting communities around the Salton Sea. The southeastern corner of California has some of the worst air pollution in the country, where dirt from farmland and the open desert mixes with windblown clouds of toxic dust rising from the Salton Sea’s receding shores.

Imperial County already has the highest rate of asthma-related emergency room visits for children in California. And the problem is about to get much worse.

At the end of this year, the sea will begin to shrink more rapidly under a water transfer deal that's abruptly cutting off a large portion of the Colorado River water that flows into the lake. Thousands of acres of lakebed will be left exposed in the coming years, sending bigger clouds of fine dust wafting into the air in the Imperial and Coachella valleys – which is laced with pesticides such as DDT and heavy metals that have accumulated in the lake over decades.

California's 10-year plan for the sea calls for building ponds and wetlands on sections of the exposed lakebed, or playa. But those projects will cover up less than half of the more than 60,000 acres of playa that will be left dry over the next 10 years.

Kaylee's mother, Eva Pineda, said she's afraid that more dust in the air will be disastrous for people's health. "I know asthma is going to get worse for the kids here," Eva said. "All those little particles are going to be flying around here and it's going to go into everybody's lungs." "It should be taken care of because it's really going to affect us," she said. "If it doesn't get fixed, there's going to be a lot of ill people with breathing problems."

[Link to full article](#)

In this expedition, we will be studying the ecosystem of the Salton Sea and evaluating plans to mitigate the damage being done.

Citation: James, Ian. "Toxic Dust and Asthma plague Salton Sea Communities." *USA Today*.

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