

California Environmental Justice (EJ) Conflicts Database Project

Case Search Methodology

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What is an environmental justice conflict case?

We define environmental justice (EJ) conflict cases as incidents where the use, distribution or management of a natural resource is contested, disputed, or the source of conflict, between a minimum of two identifiable actors where a historic or present power imbalance exists (e.g. political, racial, socio-economic power), occurring at a specific location and time.

Conflicts included in the database can and do stretch over long time horizons, but to be included in this database, the research team had to be able to define at least an approximate start date for the specific conflict. For example, issues such as unaffordable housing or groundwater depletion and contamination are vast on-going environmental injustices, but are hard to capture generally as a single conflict with a discrete beginning date and location; however, instances where a community group identified a specific groundwater contamination concern in a specific region and pushed government or industry to address the contamination would constitute a case (see for example Case ID 69).

Specifying conflict location can vary significantly across cases, with some cases confined to a single building, street block or neighborhood within a city, whereas other cases were significantly larger in spatial scale and affecting an entire city or rural region. We attempted to address these geographic scale differences by categorizing cases into a “Spatial Typology”, which defined our four most common case types:

- (1) Single Location Cases - the conflict is confined to a single, specific location or a specific address or neighborhood; for example, a power plant or landfill, (see for example Case ID 5 or Case ID 10)
- (2) Multiple Discrete Location Cases - the conflict occurs in multiple specific locations; for example a lawsuit against pesticide exposure at four different elementary schools on the Central Coast (see for example Case ID 64)
- (3) Corridor Cases- the conflict stretches along a passageway and impacts can be felt all along that stretch; for example, a freeway expansion, railroad tracks or river (see for example Case ID 23)
- (4) State/Region/County-Wide Cases- the conflict occurs at a broad geographic scale and impacts are distributed broadly; for example lawsuits of multiple counties against fossil fuel companies (see for example Case ID 32)

How did we identify cases?

To identify EJ conflicts, the research team conducted multiple phases of comprehensive web-based searching. First, we began with initial lists of environmental justice lawsuits and legal conflicts, primarily sourced from EJAtlas.org and larger environmental justice groups' websites; these lists yielded 11 conflict cases. To build on that, the team then undertook a systematic manual web-scraping approach in which we searched using Google Search each California coastal county with unique conflict sources, with searches following the format: [coastal county's name] +[a key EJ topic word] + [environmental / environmental justice conflict].

We repeated this search for each county in the study area (Del Norte, Humboldt, Mendocino, Marin, Napa, Sonoma, Solano, Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, San Mateo, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties) and for the following list of key EJ topic words:

- Fossil Fuel
- Oil
- Fisheries
- Fracking / hydraulic fracturing
- Sea Level Rise/ flooding
- Air Quality
- Refineries
- Recreation access
- Land Dispossession
- Land Conflicts/ Land Management
- Tribe/ Tribal/ indigenous
- Water quality
- Water supply/ availability/ affordability
- Ports
- Pollution
- Infrastructure
- Traffic
- Noise
- Harmful algal blooms
- Waste/ waste management

We conducted snowball searching based on the initial list of conflicts identified through this search method. We recognize that this search and identification method is likely to create a bias in our dataset toward more recent conflicts where there is more online media presence, and of course larger conflicts that have generated media coverage at all. We intend for the database to be a living document where conflicts can be added and updated as new updates take place and the research team learns of additional conflicts.

Once conflicts were identified, we then reviewed primary source materials including online media coverage (e.g. local newspapers, blogs, websites), agency reports on permits, legal and regulatory actions, and public participation processes (e.g. public comments, public meeting minutes, etc.), legal documents (e.g. court proceedings, lawsuits) and organizing or community

groups' online campaign materials. Drawing on these varied data sources, we qualitatively characterized each conflict following a codebook. Intercoder reliability checks were performed periodically throughout the full data collection process and the full research team discussed all cases where the primary research team member had questions or was uncertain how to best classify different variables.

The database is undergoing an expert review process as a quality control measure and to ensure the conflicts are portrayed fairly and as comprehensively as possible.