Disparate Impacts of Wildfire on Undocumented Immigrants

This research examines how racial and ethnic minorities face greater vulnerability to wildfires compared with primarily white communities. In particular, the most socially vulnerable, such as undocumented Latino immigrants, often face even greater challenges. Using the case study of the 2017-2018 Thomas Wildfire in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties (the largest fire in California history until recently) to highlight how governments overlooked the needs of low-income farmworkers, Spanish and Indigenous Mixtec speakers and immigrant families. The research analyzes the methods in which local immigrant rights and environmental justice groups are collaborating on climate adaptation and disaster planning initiatives to ensure: language access to emergency information, protection of farmworkers exposed to heavy smoke, and a disaster relief fund for undocumented immigrant residents ineligible for federal aid.

Dr. Michael Mendez is an assistant professor of environmental policy and planning at UC Irvine. He previously was the inaugural James and Mary Pinchot Faculty Fellow in Sustainability Studies at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Michael has more than a decade of senior-level experience in the public and private sectors, where he consulted and actively engaged in the policymaking process. This included working for the California State Legislature as a senior consultant, lobbyist, gubernatorial appointee, and as vice chair of the Sacramento City Planning Commission. Michael was also recently appointed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to the Board on Environmental Change and Society (BECS).

Michael holds three degrees in environmental planning and policy, including a PhD from UC Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning, and a graduate degree from MIT. His research on the intersection of climate change and communities of color has been featured in national publications including Urban Land (published by the Urban Land Institute); the Natural Resources Defense Fund Annual Report; the American Planning Association's Planning Magazine; Green 2.0: Leadership at Work; USA Today; and Fox Latino News. His forthcoming book “Climate Change from the Streets,” will be published by Yale University Press (Fall 2019).

Genevieve Flores-Haro serves as the Associate Director for the Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project, a nonprofit serving Ventura County’s indigenous immigrant community. In this capacity, she oversees the organization’s policy priorities, special events, and is a found member of the 805 UndocuFund. Additionally, she also supervises programs specific to health access & advocacy, mental health and domestic violence, including two multi-year mixed methods research studies.

Genevieve received her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and her Master's in Public Administration from the University of Southern California. She currently serves as Board President for Ventura County's local LGBTQ organization Diversity Collective, and is a board member for the Planned Parenthood Central Coast Action Fund. In 2018 she was awarded a Women of the Year Award by State Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson and Assemblymember Monique Limón for her work during the Thomas Fire.