

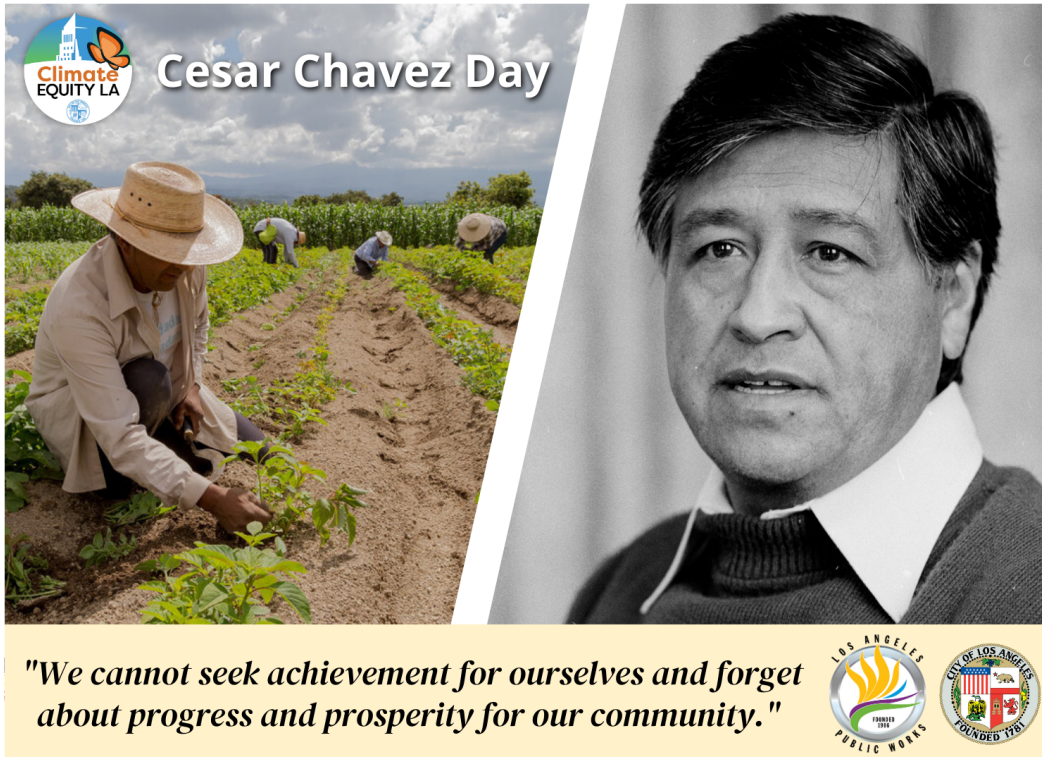


CLIMATE EMERGENCY MOBILIZATION OFFICE



Cesar Chavez: Honoring a Labor and Environmental Justice Visionary

Marta A. Segura, MPH, Chief Heat Officer and CEMO Director, Board of Public Works, City of Los Angeles



His movement and Grape Boycott gave me a way forward during a time of crisis for my community and that of so many others. Cesar Chavez was and is many things to many people. He was a Mexican-American, Indigenous leader, visionary, labor leader, civil rights activist, faith leader, and housing champion. He was committed to nonviolent resistance practiced by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. He was also mentored on how to organize with Fred Ross at the Los Angeles-based Community Service Organization (CSO). Chavez won important victories to improve working conditions and better compensation for farmworkers, with multi-faceted and intersectional strategies.

For me, he will always be the forefather of environmental justice. His Grape Boycotts influenced my life's work, and I had never heard anyone connect food to the detrimental impacts of pesticides before Chavez. In the 1980s, when I was in high school and then college, **Chavez led a boycott to ban toxic pesticides on grapes.** "NO GRAPES" and "NO UVAS" bumper stickers were everywhere, but also educational pamphlets with photos of children born with spina bifida and other birth deformities.

I was in tears and angry all at once when I first read about the connection between pesticides and these innocent babies who never had a chance to live to their potential or have healthy lives. I didn't sign up for membership, but I was one of his many "organizers", sharing his campaign with my high school friends and, later in college, writing my senior thesis on this topic. I now realize Chavez inspired me to be the first Chicana to major in Environmental Studies at UC Santa Barbara in the early 1980s. I also want to share that Dolores Huerta was equally

inspiring. Chavez lifted her as an equal, and she added brilliant strategy, compassion, and feminism to the movement! This was post-civil rights California, Reagan's California, and many people who made decisions and led the State and Nation were still stuck in the 1960s way of thinking.

For me, seeing this kind of compassionate, multi-faceted, and diverse leadership protecting the most vulnerable among us was my way out of oppression and confusion, and led me to be the person I am today. It has guided many of my decisions from what I studied as an undergraduate and graduate student, to my career choices in the non-profit, and then government sector. I am a servant of the people. I have to remember those UFW booklets with babies born with birth defects like spina bifida as a result of pesticide exposure, and it centers me on my purpose all over again.

Chavez was acutely aware of the disparate unhealthy conditions of farmworkers, from the back-breaking conditions in the fields and lack of water during the extreme heat in the summer months, to the pesticides being sprayed over the workers and their families. Farmworkers then and now are exploited and invisible. **He once said, "We farm workers are closest to food production. We were the first to recognize the serious health hazards of agriculture pesticides to both consumers and ourselves."** He also saw the damage to the soil and the environment.

It grieved him to see how pesticides and fertilizers led to cancer, birth deformities, chronic pulmonary and organ failure, and yes, death. Chavez recognized the role of a healthy environment, and the need for food free from pesticides for consumers as well. The art, booklets, films, posters, and plays were brilliant, and a combination of the talent of so many that were inspired by his vision. If people knew that the grapes were laden with pesticides and hurt their families as well, they too would boycott the exploitative growers who were responsible, catalyzing awareness, compassion, understanding, and support of the farmworkers' and their family's unhealthy work and living conditions. He unified consumers from every walk of life to the plight of the Mexican, Filipino, and Muslim farm workers in California and beyond.

There is no doubt in my mind that Chavez was instrumental in calling attention to the intersectionality of pesticide exposures, environmental injustices, health disparities, poor housing conditions, and lack of access to health insurance, education, and living wages. I know I am here as a climate and environmental justice leader because I followed his path. Today, many of us advocate for an intersectional approach of unifying environmental justice, ecosystem health, housing justice, workforce equity, and healthcare access, that are inextricably connected if the goal is healthy, thriving communities.

Nonetheless, the fight for equity and justice in the climate and environmental justice arena continues to be a struggle, even under the Biden Administration. Justice40 paves the way for a new era of investments in the historically disinvested areas of the Nation. Leaders tend to silo issues and silo people, and thus we miss the big picture and the big opportunities to integrate economic recovery with the recovery of our dignity, health, and environment.

Yet, we have an opportunity to make good on the vision of the Labor Leader Cesar Chavez, and optimize the opportunity of creating livable, healthy, thriving communities, dignified and high-wage jobs in the green economy, and truly affordable and green housing, that everyday people and farmworkers can afford with a renewable energy-focused and restorative economy. **Let's make good on the vision of Cesar Chavez, and the wisdom of our community that led him to this dream.**

Call to Action: We will reflect, dialogue, and put into action a model that integrates equity and environmental justice, and centers the voices of the community. **Join us on Thursday, April 27 at 6:00 pm! [Register here for our Climate Equity LA Series event on Community-Driven Climate Resilience.](#)**