

Los Angeles Daily News

COLUMNS

It's pollution as usual unless vulnerable communities' leaders act: Guest commentary



Los Angeles smog. (Getty Images)

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POSTED: 06/27/17, 8:50 AM PDT |

California is a recognized leader on climate issues. But right now this reputation is on the line.

The next phase of our climate innovation must be clearly linked to addressing environmental-justice concerns in communities that are disproportionately affected by pollution and on the front lines of climate change.

As a member of the California Air Resources Board's [Environmental Justice Advisory Committee](#), I've worked for years to ensure that low-income communities of color are not left behind in policies that address air quality and climate change.

Many of the drivers of poor air quality and climate change are the same sources: large refineries, power plants and diesel trucks. More than half of California's stationary climate polluters are located in communities of color, including 15 out of 20 of our refineries. These facilities don't just release greenhouse gases, but also a range of pollutants that harm air quality and health, such as ozone, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide.

Research has found that the more greenhouse gases a facility emits, the higher their toxic and criteria air pollutant emissions are.

As Big Oil attempts to damage our health by pushing a climate and air quality proposal that actually undermines our ability to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and could worsen air quality and health impacts, Gov. Jerry Brown and state legislators must stay committed to solutions that improve local air quality and prioritize environmental justice.

California's cap and trade program has significant flaws that environmental justice communities have highlighted for many years. Before he can say our state's cap-and-trade program is a model for other places, he must take care of communities here at home.

Cap and trade is not achieving the win-win outcomes of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving local air quality. Research has shown that greenhouse gas emissions from some facilities have actually increased, rather than cutting emissions directly at the source. Offsets and free allowance give polluters cheap ways to comply with climate regulations and avoid reducing the toxins coming out of their smokestack, trading away clean air benefits.

We have a long-standing issue with criteria and toxic emissions that is harming the health of our communities. Facilities need to clean up their act, especially if they are benefiting from a carbon market.

California needs climate solutions that work for our most vulnerable communities. We must be willing to adopt innovative strategies that will propel our state towards a transition away from fossil fuels, while generating an equitable economy that provides clean air and jobs. We need to hold polluters accountable to clean the air that our families breathe.

The current system, with all its loopholes, cannot reduce the emissions needed to get to our 2030 targets. The price of carbon is too low to generate meaningful pollution reduction or even significant revenues.

In this critical political moment, when President Trump and other U.S. leaders are rolling back on the fight to tackle climate change, California leaders must double down on climate — especially for the communities that need it the most. Unfortunately, California's Assembly failed to demonstrate strong climate and environmental justice leadership when it did not pass [Assembly Bill 378](#), by Assembly members Cristina Garcia, D-Downey; Chris Holden, D-Pasadena, and Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella, a bill that would have addressed air quality concerns in such communities.

I'm disappointed that Assemblyman Sebastian Ridley-Thomas, D-Los Angeles, who represents South Los Angeles, failed to support the bill. His district suffers from some of the worst air quality in the nation, and we deserve legislators who support policies that will help prevent polluters from continuing to pollute as usual.

California cannot maintain our climate leadership if we do not address the environmental and climate needs of our most vulnerable residents. I encourage legislators and Gov. Brown to put us on an effective and equitable path to achieve our ambitious 2030 climate goals. No more pollution as usual.

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