



COMMENTARY

Hard Votes Must Be Cast to Champion Environmental Justice in Pacoima

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With President Trump pulling out of the Paris Agreement, Governor Brown in China discussing climate policy, and the recent failure of the Assembly to pass a critical climate bill, it's time to seriously consider what it means to champion environmental justice in the current policy debates.

Growing up in Pacoima, a city dominated by industry, I personally felt the impacts of poor air quality on my health. The city is bordered by 3 freeways, 7 active landfills, multiple factories, and a railroad with heavy diesel emissions. Residents have high rates of asthma, cancer rates and a lack of open space and parks. The cumulative impact of these pollution sources makes Pacoima one of the most heavily impacted communities in the state. Not surprisingly, Pacoima is 85 percent Latino, predominantly working class.

Today, I work as a policy advocate for the California Environmental Justice Alliance, a statewide coalition that advances solutions to address the pollution in communities like Pacoima. The organizations that make up CEJA work directly in communities on the frontlines of two, related crises: air quality and climate change. California has some of the dirtiest air in the nation. According to the American Lung Association, Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Fresno, and Visalia make the top five list of most ozone and particulate-polluted regions in the country. These statistics have a real-life impact on people, causing adverse health effects including asthma, cardiovascular disease, premature birth and low birth weight, and premature death.

Many of the drivers of poor air quality and climate change are the same: large refineries, factories and power plants, and millions of cars and trucks. Environmental justice communities like Pacoima tend to have multiple sources, creating a "hot spot."

The impacts of climate change - droughts, heat waves, wildfires and other impacts all worsen our air quality. Many residents in these hard-hit areas often lack access to health care to properly treat health issues. To top it all off, communities who are suffering the worst have the fewest resources to adapt to changing conditions.

California's cap and trade system is not helping this dire situation. More than half of California's stationary climate polluters are located in communities of color, including 15 out of 20 of our refineries.

On top of greenhouse gases, they release a range of pollutants that harm air quality and health. The more greenhouse gases a facility emits, the higher the toxic and criteria air pollutant emissions.

Rather than cutting emissions directly, cap and trade has loopholes, like offsets and free allowances, that trade away local clean air benefits.

We need the most aggressive policies possible to address the climate change and air quality crises in environmental justice communities. If a legislator wants to champion environmental justice and climate policies, here are two ways to put that into action.

First, legislators must support policy proposals that directly reduce toxic air emissions. Legislators cannot simply claim they are championing environmental justice in climate policy and then fail to take the hard votes.

We saw that last week when many Assemblymembers voted no or failed to vote in support of AB 378 by Cristina Garcia, Chris Holden, and Eduardo Garcia, a bill that would have addressed air quality concerns in environmental justice communities.

Second, legislators must support a carbon pricing policy that ensures the industries contributing to climate change pay a fair price for the environmental devastation they cause. The overabundance of allowances and offsets in the current cap and trade system prevent on-site improvements that would directly improve local air quality.

These same loopholes prevent the program from aggressively driving down emissions, and are a barrier to achieving our ambitious 2030 greenhouse gas emission targets.

While California's global climate leadership is urgently needed more than ever, let's not leave behind my community of Pacoima, or any community in our state.

California needs climate solutions that work for our most vulnerable communities, and I encourage our legislators and Governor Brown to put us on an effective and equitable path to achieve our ambitious 2030 climate goals.

Putting environmental justice at the center of climate policy is the next phase of climate innovation, so let's be the leaders we claim to be and get to work.

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