



People, Power, Policy

Coalition Challenges California to Legislate Climate Equity

By Kay Cuajunco, Photos by Brooke Anderson

On August 25th, community leaders from across the state converged on the steps of the Capitol to demand climate policies that benefit and protect low-income communities and communities of color. In commemoration of the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, residents from some of the state's most pollution-impacted communities stood in solidarity with frontline communities across the nation, urging their legislators to pass policies to transition away from dirty fossil fuels and ensure another Katrina doesn't happen again.



The rally was part of the California Environmental Justice Alliance's (CEJA) annual Congreso, a two-day conference that seeks to build a stronger movement for equity and justice in statewide environmental policy. CEJA members and allies stood together in solidarity from the Golden State to the Gulf Coast to honor the sacrifice of so many and recognize how the heartache and pain from Hurricane Katrina has forced the environmental justice movement to grow stronger and more resilient.

Climate change has hit the Gulf Coast hard and discriminatory policies and unjust practices continue to leave many low-income communities of color sick and displaced. As we saw 10 years ago in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the government continues to fail to invest in infrastructure to protect us or respond to our needs in times of crisis. This is climate injustice.



People of color are the new majority in California and decision-makers can no longer ignore us. We have new opportunities to alter the patterns of environmental degradation and climate chaos. CEJA represents 20,000 community members across California most impacted by pollution and poverty and this year the theme for our Congreso was "People, Power, Policy" in celebration of our visionary grassroots policy-making fueled by people power throughout the state. We're working together to advance policies that protect low-income communities and communities of color during times of crisis and lift up community-led climate solutions

that will help our state transition to 100 percent equitable, renewable energy.

As people across the country and around the world gear up for another round of international climate negotiations at the United Nations in December, people are looking to California to lead in equitable climate policies that benefit low-income communities of color who are hit first and worst by the impacts of climate change. CEJA empowers frontline communities to advocate for policies like these, but we also need climate leadership from decision-makers.



During our Congreso, we honored Senate President pro Tempore Kevin de León with the first Environmental Justice Leadership Award for championing environmental policies centered on equity, and for his bold leadership on SB 350, a bill that will increase our state's use of renewable energy, cut petroleum use, and increase energy efficiency.

CEJA is a strong supporter of SB 350, which will help direct small-scale renewable energy into communities that need it the most and generate local clean energy jobs. CEJA's other priority, AB 693, will help low-income communities and communities of color currently locked out of renewable energy benefits, with solar installations at affordable, multifamily housing units, so renters can receive a portion of the energy produced on site at their apartment complex, thus reducing their monthly utility bills.



As our state develops the next generation of climate policies that will help us meet the greatest challenge to our planet, environmental justice must be at the center. We are a leader-rich movement that is changing the face of climate leadership. By advancing energy equity and seizing climate policy opportunities at this critical moment, low-income communities and communities of color are leading the way in the transition from dirty energy and fossil fuels to a clean energy future that will provide our communities with good local jobs and a healthier environment.

Our opening panel of Juan Flores from Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, Christine Cordero from Center for Story-based Strategy, and Antonio Diaz from People Organized to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER) bridged the local, statewide and national struggles for environmental justice. We heard stories from community leaders reclaiming public land for community gardens to resist gentrification, the fight against fracking in the Central Valley, and lessons from last year's People's Climate March in New York City.

"We have one thing the oil companies don't have: people power. We're empowering community members not to be afraid. We're holding legislators accountable." - Juan Flores, CRPE



CEJA honored Senate President pro Tempore Kevin de León with the first Environmental Justice Leadership Award. De León has championed environmental policies centered on equity—first SB 535 and now SB 350, a bill that would create equitable renewable energy standards—to help make California a leader in climate and energy policy with low-income communities and communities of color at its forefront.



Elma del Aguila, a youth member from the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), speaks of the connections between the Central Coast and communities on the Gulf Coast impacted by Big Oil and rising sea levels, which threaten their safety and livelihoods. Hundreds supported CAUSE at the California Public Utilities Commission hearing in Oxnard last July to demand Not One More Power Plant.

“They think that because we are a community made up of minorities, we will not speak out against this injustice. They think that because we are a city of minorities, our beaches can be used as a dumping ground for their toxic slum. They think that because we are a city of minorities, we will allow this environmental racism to happen. They think that they can walk all over us because we aren't strong enough to fight them. They don't understand that when people come together, we become an unstoppable force capable of taking down any company, any politician.” - Elma Del Aguila, CAUSE

Mari Rose Taruc, State Organizing Director at the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) reminded us all of how far the environmental justice movement has come and how we are powerful beyond imagination.

“We are evolving our environmental and climate justice work so that the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, and the tragedies we experience in our communities in the valley, to our coasts, to our homelands, are not repeated. Our heartaches drive our passions that drive our innovations. And we become more powerful beyond imagination. That's what we need in these times for a Just Transition. That's the energy we need to bring inside the Capitol.” - Mari Rose Taruc, APEN

