

Real Climate Leadership Starts With California's Most Impacted Communities

By Gladys Limón

Governor Brown is currently in Europe promoting California's climate policies at the United Nations Climate Conference. Experts from across the globe are weighing in to say that our state could be particularly hard hit by the changing climate, with extreme heat, drought and lack of access to clean water, increased storms and wildfires, sea level rise, and worsening air quality. Here on the ground in California we don't need experts to tell us how bad things could get, they are life threatening now.

Magali Sanchez-Hall, a member of Communities for a Better Environment in South Los Angeles, lives 500 yards away from the Tesoro oil refinery in Wilmington. From her window at night, she can see the sky light up with flares from the refinery. In addition to the five major oil refineries in a nine-mile radius, multiple freeways crisscross her neighborhood, along with busy port complexes that bring heavy pollution. Most of her family suffers from asthma, so doors and windows are kept closed to avoid the toxic fumes. Every neighbor on her street has a household member who has struggled with or died from cancer.

The community in Wilmington is not alone. Communities living and working next to polluting factories, oil drilling and fracking sites, industrial agriculture, freeways, rail yards and freight facilities, refineries, and power plants are breathing the dirtiest air in the country, and they are already experiencing the impacts of climate change. These sources of pollution are the largest greenhouse gas emitters, and they don't just release greenhouse gases — they also release a range of other toxic pollutants. Across California, they are disproportionately located in low-income communities and communities of color, which have less resources to adapt.

Communities throughout the state, like those in South Los Angeles and Wilmington, are looking to our legislators to step up their leadership on meaningful climate policies, but the reality is, it's not happening. The most recent climate policy passed — extending cap and trade until 2030 — contains so many loopholes for polluters that it is unclear what level of decline we will see in California's actual emissions and whether we will be able to reach our 2030 climate targets. Not only does California's cap and trade program fail to address air pollution directly at the source, but data from the program reveals that in-state emissions in some sectors have actually risen. Despite reduced emissions overall, the level of smog in Southern California has worsened for the second straight year. This year's cap and trade deal granted Big Oil major concessions, and the consequences will be felt first and worst in low-income communities and communities of color, like Magali's, that are right next to our state's biggest polluters.

Both the global climate crisis and the severe health burdens borne by frontline communities require that we stop extracting fossil fuels and thus phase-out both production and consumption. California continues to be one of the nation's largest oil and gas producers, yet decision makers have failed to create a clear plan to transition off fossil fuels. Without this type of action, conditions will only worsen for more communities across the state. As the Air Resources Board works to design our carbon market, we need to close additional loopholes that will further prevent California from directly reducing emissions. Governor Brown has not made it a priority to transition off fossil fuels, and we must look to community leaders on the ground like Magali as the real climate leaders.

We have the right to live in communities where we can breathe clean air, drink clean water, and imagine a future for our children and ourselves. We must improve air quality and public health by cutting emissions directly at the source to effectively address health impacts, reduce asthma rates, and prevent respiratory cancers and other illnesses. By protecting the communities most impacted by pollution and poverty, we can create a healthier environment for all Californians. Only climate policies and solutions that place equity at the center by addressing existing climate and pollution realities of the most vulnerable communities will achieve our collective vision for a healthy, sustainable future.

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