

Climate change: Pollution hits low-income communities hardest



BY **QUENTIN FOSTER** POSTED 08.01.2016

There are a lot of questions surrounding California climate policy right now. For me, growing up in Watts, Los Angeles, the most important question is: how will state climate policies help low-income communities and communities of color?

As a child, I witnessed firsthand the harmful effects of pollution. Watts is ranked in the top 10% most polluted communities in the state, and is just one example of how low-income communities of color are more likely to live near freeways, power plants, rail yards, and other large polluting facilities with the highest carbon emissions in California. Climate change hits low-income communities and communities of color first and worst, and this has to be the starting point for climate policy.

Until policymakers fully commit to equity in state climate strategies, residents in neighborhoods like Watts where I grew up will never see the opportunities and health they deserve.

Low-income communities and communities of color struggle with toxic air quality hotspots. Industrial emissions – those from refineries and power plants often sited near communities of color – are on the rise. Companies like Chevron and Tesoro, our biggest polluters, buy the right to pollute through offsets, investing in projects across the country that have dubious climate benefits. The current price of carbon is too low to pressure these big companies to change their practices. And still, the California Air Resources Board (ARB) won't release critical data that could help us understand what is happening in frontline communities.

In a move that undermines public process, ARB just proposed regulations to extend California's cap-and-trade program, without addressing long-held equity concerns. These issues are being raised at community workshops ARB is hosting across the state, as part of updating the plan to achieve greenhouse gas reduction goals by 2030. If the agency is already proposing regulations that keep California on the same old path, how will they incorporate feedback from community leaders across the state?

Low-income communities and communities of color need to see the win-win potential of climate policies: regulations that directly reduce emissions in our communities and lead to cleaner air and improved public health, and set our state on an aggressive path to transitioning off fossil fuels.

That's why the California Environmental Justice Alliance supports two bills in the legislature right now: SB 32, authored by Senator Pavley, and AB 197, authored by Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia. They are important measures that will establish strong climate goals, while creating new opportunities for decision-makers to grapple with urgent equity issues.

AB 197 sets six-year terms that can be renewed for California Air Resource Board members, and requires the agency to consider adopting measures that would result in direct reductions from major stationary sources of pollution and from tailpipes, which together account for a majority of all greenhouse gas emissions. SB 32 requires ARB to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40% below 1990 levels by 2030. These bills will increase transparency at our state agencies and create a clear path for our state to tackle climate change.

Until policymakers fully commit to equity in state climate strategies, residents in neighborhoods like Watts where I grew up will never see the opportunities and health they deserve. We can reduce pollution, fight climate change, and improve quality of life in environmental justice communities, and passing SB 32 and AB 197 are first steps towards realizing the win-win potential of California climate policy.

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Ed's Note: Quentin Foster is Policy Advocate at the California Environmental Justice Alliance.