

Advancing Climate Justice: Transforming the Economy, Public Health & Our Environment

Policy Recommendations Designed to Secure Climate Justice in Communities of Color and Low Income

An Environmental Justice Conference Sponsored by WE ACT for Environmental Justice

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WE ACT

WE ACT for Environmental Justice (aka West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc.) is a non-profit, community-based, environmental justice organization dedicated to building community power to fight environmental racism and improve environmental health, protection and policy in communities of color. WE ACT accomplishes this mission through community organizing, education and training, advocacy and research, and public policy development.

As a result of our ongoing work to educate and mobilize our base – the more than 630,000 residents of Northern Manhattan – on environmental issues affecting their quality of life, WE ACT has become a leader in the nationwide movement for environmental justice, influencing the creation of federal, state and local policies affecting the environment.

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INTRODUCTION: *Advancing Climate Justice: Transforming the Economy, Public Health & Our Environment*

On January 29-30, 2009, WE ACT for Environmental Justice held a conference entitled *Advancing Climate Justice: Transforming the Economy, Public Health & Our Environment*. The conference was held at Fordham University's Lincoln Center Campus and aided by numerous sponsors, including but not limited to: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Ford Foundation, the Earth Institute at Columbia University, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the US Environmental Protection Agency Office of Environmental Justice.

Over 400 community leaders and experts in the fields of environmental justice, public policy, legal advocacy, and various sciences provided their perspectives on the trends and trajectory of climate justice. Participants actively discussed topics related to climate change and its environmental, public health, and economic impacts, particularly on communities of color and low income. These presentations culminated in jointly developed policy recommendations designed to secure climate justice for those communities.

The meeting was comprehensive, with the context expanding beyond local to national and global impact. Clearly defined lines shaping the current political debate between advocates and legislators were drawn, with a particular focus on "cap-and-trade" versus other systems of environmental legislation. The conference was loosely structured around the fields of economics, energy, public health, gender, and youth. The policy recommendations that resulted from this joint endeavor, incorporating these elements, are highlighted below.

WHAT IS CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Climate justice is the recognition that climate change will impact environmental justice communities first and worst. The charge to rectify climate injustice has been led by environmental justice communities and organizations, indigenous peoples, and all others traditionally excluded from the political decision-making process because of racism or poverty. For example, increased greenhouse gas emissions will also increase co-pollutants that harm human health and degrade the environment. Yet current legislative and regulatory efforts fail sufficiently to address these issues. As a result, WE ACT has been working with a coalition of two-dozen environmental justice organizations throughout the country in order to ensure that the voices of politically marginalized communities are included in climate change legislation.

The Political Debate – Cap-and-Trade vs. Cap-and-Tax

Under so-called “cap-and-trade” systems, carbon emitters would be issued federal emission credits (“permits” to emit a defined amount) allowing them to pollute up to a certain limit. Those who do not reach that limit may sell their leftover credits on the open market to those who must pay to pollute beyond that limit. The limit gradually is reduced with the hope of reducing carbon emissions. This proposal informed the failed Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act – the most prominent global warming bill to have reached the Senate.

The conference featured critics who noted that such cap-and-trade systems at best minimally effect greenhouse gas emissions and at worst perpetuate global warming, since those who find it less cost-effective to reduce their emissions can simply purchase additional credits to emit at precisely those carbon emissions that the government seeks to reduce. The problem is that federal legislation using primarily cap-and-trade mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions from power plants does not achieve that end in an equitable and efficient manner, particularly since corporations and facilities do not have to pay for any credits below the limit and would have little financial incentive to reduce emissions.

A better system, one which ACJ supports, is a “cap-and-tax” system that places a regulatory cap on carbon emissions and would tax all polluting facilities, requiring them to pay for the pollution they create. This would more forcefully compel polluters to reduce their emissions and consider transitioning to clean, renewable energy sources.

ACJ CONFERENCE BREAKDOWN

The conference's opening plenary framed the climate crisis, with panelists providing an overview of the public health impacts of climate change, the disparate impact experienced by environmental justice communities, and the intersection between the global demand for climate justice and the traditional environmental justice movement. Panelists also discussed the international implications of a domestic climate response and the opportunity to create global climate justice action.

With a concern for protecting current and future populations, speakers at the forefront of the domestic climate justice movement presented a national demand for just climate solutions by introducing the national Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change. With over 35 member organizations, these environmental justice advocates interact with scientists, academics, and mainstream environmental groups to catalyze and inform state and federal, political and legislative action that compels the development of just policies and mechanisms that equitably reduces carbon emissions in all communities.

The conference held several workshop sessions over two days during which panelists discussed the most effective ways to achieve just climate change solutions. These sessions inherently involved considerations of several elements, which may roughly be identified as: economics, energy, public policy, and the critical role of youth. All participants brought to the conference their unique perspective and intimate knowledge of some element of the climate justice movement as a whole.

Climate Change Economics and Policy

Highlighting the opportunities for economic growth and advancement created by climate change, panelists laid the groundwork for a more positive and progressive understanding of the economics of climate change. As the largest and most powerful nation in the world economy, it is our responsibility to lead the search for global warming solutions. To that end, we must situate domestic emissions reduction in the larger context of a global response to climate change. There is still time to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, if we take strong action now. The costs of stabilizing the climate are significant but manageable; delay would be dangerous and much more costly.

- Stabilization requires that emissions be at least 80% below current levels by 2050.
- Annual costs of achieving stabilization are estimated to be around 1% of global GDP, and they would be even lower if we accelerate our innovation in low-carbon technologies and recognize the significant business opportunities such innovation creates.
- Implement a bottom-line price on carbon via taxation and greater regulatory oversight.
- Support innovation and the deployment of low-carbon technologies.
- Implement pilot programs to explore the best ways to curb deforestation.
- In the international context, promote cooperation with other countries to create a more standardized international system.
- Action on climate change is required across all countries, and it need not cap the aspirations for growth of rich or poor countries.

Energy

Panelists examined the impact of maintaining low-cost, reliable power to sustain increasing national demand for energy in communities located near traditional energy sources, particularly in the southeast and southwest states. Panelists also discussed the shifts in energy sources occurring throughout the country and the elements necessary to encourage, support, and accelerate this shift to alternative energy sources. Speakers included Christian Parenti, contributing editor to *The Nation*; Gil Quinones, Chief Operating Officer of the New York Power Authority; and Mary Anne Hitt, Deputy Director of Sierra Club's National Coal Campaign. They presented a wealth of information on different forms of renewable energy: biomass (wood, municipal solid waste and biogas), hydropower, geothermal, wind, and solar energy (solar thermal and photovoltaic systems). Renewable energy can be encouraged by a number of initiatives:

- Federal Renewable Energy Pollution Tax Credit (PTC) – an inflation-adjusted tax credit for electricity produced from qualifying renewable energy sources or technologies. The Energy Policy Act of 2005, signed by President Bush, expanded the types of qualifying sources and systems.
- State mandates – require that a percentage of electric power generation or sales come from renewable energy.
- Green power programs – U.S. consumers in many States can purchase electricity generated by renewable energy resources, termed “green power.” Most of these programs sell power produced by new wind and landfill gas-to-energy projects.
- State financial incentives – Many states subsidize the installation of renewable energy equipment. For example, in California, a state “buy-down” program for photovoltaic equipment has greatly increased the number and size of such systems installed on houses and buildings.
- Federal tax credit for solar energy systems – EPCRA 2005 established a tax credit of up to 30% of the cost of solar electric and hot water systems, not to exceed \$2000, for systems installed in 2006 and 2007.
- Ethanol Use and Production – The Federal Government has required the use of oxygenates in gasoline for certain regions of the country to reduce air pollution from vehicles, and ethanol is the most popular oxygenate. EPCRA 2005 will eliminate the oxygenate requirement in early 2006, but phase in a national renewable fuels standard. This will require that 4 billion gallons of renewable fuel be produced in 2006 and increase to 8 billion gallons in 2012. Most of this fuel is expected to be ethanol.

Public Health

Panelists discussed the broad disparate impacts that climate change has on low-income and communities of color, the particular vulnerability of certain segments of these communities, and the opportunity for public health advocacy arising out of these impacted and energized communities. Speakers included Dr. Patrick Kinney, Environmental Health Sciences Professor at Columbia University; John Balbus, M.D., MPH, Chief Health Scientist for the Environmental Defense Fund; and Jei Fong, a grassroots organizer within the Chinese and working class communities of New York City. Speakers addressed New York's changing climate, including rising summer temperatures coupled with little change in rainfall, leading to more short-term (one-to-three month) droughts. They also presented alarming projections for coastal flooding caused by rising sea levels, with disturbing graphical depictions of shoreline changes across Metropolitan New York. Moreover, the impacts on human health are likely to be severe unless the United States takes action nationally and globally to reduce carbon emissions and develop appropriate adaptation measures quickly and significantly.

- Air quality – Pollution from ground-level ozone and other components of smog, coupled with global warming, is expected to worsen air quality in the region, putting more stress on people with cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. For example, asthma currently afflicts one in four children living in Central Harlem. On days with poor air quality, both children and adults are more likely to have difficulty breathing, and people with asthma may require emergency room visits.
- New York's Response – Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) – the first multi-state, market-based plan to reduce emissions from power plants.

Engaging Our Youth

Around the country, from campuses to communities, young people are leading the fight for Climate Justice. The conference highlighted the work of amazing youth activists working to organize and mobilize their communities. The panel was part of a student track of panels organized by the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative (EJCC). The panels were moderated by Nia Robinson and Kari Fulton, Director of EJCC and National Campus Campaign Coordinator, respectively, for the EJCC.

- Climate justice demands that the youth be incorporated into the movement as equal participants.
- The education of present and future generations is absolutely critical to achieving just climate change solutions.
- WE ACT's Youth Leadership & Development Program aims to prepare the next generation to understand and confront environmental issues that directly affect them. Past initiatives primarily involved African American and Latino youth in Northern Manhattan, and provided numerous educational and practical learning experiences in the field of environmental justice.
- Earth Crew – Between 1993 and 2002, WE ACT's Earth Crew was an environmental education, community service, and internship program that involved over 200 youth in community projects resulting in positive impacts on their neighborhoods in Northern Manhattan. The program also addressed issues of youth underemployment and educated them about the urban environment with the goal of helping these youth make informed and responsible decisions. Earth Crew taught such valuable skills as critical thinking, public speaking, environmental audits, pollution monitoring, community leadership, and community gardening.
- The main goals we should strive to achieve when incorporating the youth into the climate justice movement are: to enhance awareness of their environment; to empower them to protect and improve their environment; and to develop their leadership abilities.

CLIMATE JUSTICE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary focus of the Environmental Justice movement since its inception has been ensuring public health for communities of color and low-income. Public health, however, has been left behind the debate over America's policies with regard to climate change. WE ACT and other partners in the Climate Justice Leadership Forum have determined the following to be the EJ priorities:

1. **Public health must be a major consideration** in policies and legislation governing America's climate mitigation and adaptation strategy, regardless of the determinations regarding federal spending on natural resources and wildlife protection.
2. Public health policy must also include **funding for training and placement** for health professionals in low-income communities of color in order to ensure access
3. Green jobs considerations within the nation's overall strategy to combat climate change must encompass industries beyond the energy sector and **must ensure training and access for workers from low-income communities of color**
4. The nation's climate policy must include resources for **protecting low- and middle-income communities and families** from the potential market volatility of pollution trading
5. The market and trading system that is eventually developed under our legislative process must be **transparent and adequately regulated** in order to avoid fraud and windfall profits for energy companies at the expense of ratepayers.

Principles of Climate Justice

Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change

1. Establish a zero carbon economy and achieve this by limiting and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with the levels advocated by the scientific community (25% by 2020 and 80% by 2050) through mechanisms that are controlled by the public sector, generate revenue, are transparent, easily understandable by all, can be set-up quickly and have a track record of improving environmental quality;
2. Protect all of America's people - regardless of race, gender, nationality, or socioeconomic status - and their communities equally from the environmental, health and social impacts of climate change. Ensure that any solutions implemented to respond to or mitigate climate change do not violate human or environmental rights;
3. Ensure that carbon reduction strategies do not negatively impact public health and do not further exacerbate existing health disparities among communities. This includes crafting strategies that prevent the creation of pollution hotspots, eliminate existing emissions hotspots in vulnerable communities, and reduce the emissions of greenhouse gas co-pollutants in and near communities-of-color, Indigenous, and low-income communities;
4. Require those most responsible for creating the impacts that arise from climate change to bear the proportionate cost of responding to the resulting economic, social and environmental crisis. In setting the proportionate cost of climate impacting activity, the full environmental, health, social and economic cost of energy use from extraction to disposal must be included to accurately reflect the cost that energy use has on our environment, our health and our communities;
5. Develop a national goal supported by legislatively dedicated resources to transition us from the fossil fuel economy to the green, clean renewable energy economy by 2020;
6. Position the public sector to be a catalyst for change in the transition to the green, clean renewable energy economy by dedicating some of the revenues generated by carbon reduction strategies to support green clean renewable energy initiatives;
7. Create the opportunity for all Americans, especially people-of-color, Indigenous Peoples and low-income Americans, to experience a just transition as well as participate in the creation and operation of a new green economy by creating a workforce development program to grow living-wage, clean, safe, green jobs in the energy sector and beyond;
8. Provide an economic and social safety net for low-income, people-of-color, Indigenous Peoples and those vulnerable in the middle-income from the structural adjustments in the economy as we transition from the pollution generating fossil fuel economy to the green, clean and renewable economy;
9. Ensure that the green economy has enough jobs for those who need to be retrained and those who historically have been chronically underemployed, unemployed and/or excluded from unions; and
10. Ensure that people-of-color, Indigenous Peoples and low-income communities, who are and continue to be disproportionately impacted by climate change, have the inalienable right to have our voices shape what is the most significant policy debate of the 21st Century.

The Environmental Justice Leadership Forum on Climate Change believes that climate change policies that incorporate these principles are the way forward for the United States of America to restore our credibility nationally.