

Subcommittee Highlights Deficiencies in EPA Environmental Justice Program; Legislative Remedies Discussed

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NEWS RELEASE

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman

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Contact: Jodi Seth or Lauren Bloomberg, 202-225-5735

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Washington, DC — The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) efforts on environmental justice reviews are inadequate, according to testimony today by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) before the Subcommittee on Environment and Hazardous Materials. John B. Stephenson, GAO Director of Natural Resources deemed EPA's actions "sufficiently incomplete."

Although an Environmental Justice Executive Order was issued in 1994 to ensure that minority and low-income communities were not unfairly burdened, both the EPA Office of Inspector General and the GAO have reported that EPA's efforts on environmental justice reviews are inadequate.

The testimony was delivered during a legislative hearing led by Chairman Albert Wynn (D-MD) on the public's right to know about local environmental hazards. The hearing specifically examined two pieces of legislation that seek to address the situation, H.R. 1103, "The Environmental Justice Act of 2007," and H.R. 1055, "The Toxic Right to Know Protection Act."

"Too many of America's low-income and minority communities face a dangerous environmental threat, and most of them have no idea," said Wynn. "If this injustice goes unaddressed, high exposure levels of toxins within these neighborhoods will continue to negatively affect the most vulnerable among us — infants and young children."

According to EPA studies, low-income and minority populations are disproportionately exposed to adverse environmental conditions. Exposure to high levels of air pollution has been associated with premature births, and respiratory illnesses, such as asthma, that can lead to serious disabilities and death.

Additional witness testimony focused on provisions included in H.R. 1055 and H.R. 1103. H.R. 1055, sponsored by Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ), that would reverse EPA changes to the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI), which provides important information to the public about toxic chemicals used and released in their neighborhoods. These changes, which were finalized by the EPA in 2006, include an increase in the threshold that triggers reporting requirements from 500 to 5,000 pounds, and a reduction in the number of facilities forced to report the toxic chemicals released. If not reversed by Congress, nearly 3,500 facilities, predominately located in minority and low-income communities, could stop reporting. To avoid this, the bill would re-establish the original chemical reporting thresholds and ensure that annual reporting of TRI data is maintained.

"Communities have a right to know what kinds of chemicals are being released in their backyards," Pallone said. "The Bush administration's recent rules loosening reporting requirements for the Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) leave communities around the nation with less power to hold companies accountable and make informed decisions about how toxic chemicals are to be managed. My legislation will codify the stronger reporting requirements that were in place before the Bush administration weakened them, and will ensure future administrations cannot change the guidelines without the approval of Congress."

H.R. 1103, "The Environmental Justice Act of 2007," sponsored by Rep. Hilda Solis (D-CA), would codify the 1994 Executive Order and correct identified deficiencies in the EPA's environmental justice program.

"Today's hearing made clear that the health and welfare of minority and low-income communities has suffered in the absence of a real commitment to environmental justice by the Bush Administration. This hearing was another demonstration of our commitment to righting these injustices and was just the first step of many that we must take," said Congresswoman Hilda L. Solis, Vice Chair of the Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee. "I am proud to work with communities across the country on H.R. 1103, the Environmental Justice Act of 2007, and just as I have before, I will continue to fight to improve the health and welfare of minority and low-income communities across our country."

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

2125 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515