

Opening Statement  
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Energy and Commerce Committee  
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change  
Hearing on “Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy: The Challenges Facing Frontline  
Communities”  
November 20, 2019

Today we continue our series of climate change hearings aimed at developing comprehensive legislation to achieve a one hundred percent clean economy by 2050. This hearing will focus on the important issue of environmental justice, and the ways that climate change is exacerbating disparities in access to a clean and safe environment.

It is an unfortunate, but inescapable, fact that where you live in this country determines the extent of the environmental health risks you face. Air pollution, contaminated sites, waste disposal sites, and drinking water violations all impact overburdened communities.

A recent report found that more than two million Americans lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation. It also finds that race is the strongest predictor of access to safe drinking water. Native Americans are less likely to have a reliable drinking water supply than any other group. This is not acceptable.

And, climate change is making matters worse. According to the Government Accountability Office, nearly two-thirds of sites on the Superfund National Priority List are in areas that may be impacted by climate change effects such as flooding, storm surges, wildfires, and sea-level rise. We have already seen the results. Toxic floodwaters carried pollutants from Superfund sites in the wakes of recent hurricanes, including Maria, Harvey, and Michael.

All this disproportionately and adversely affects environmental justice communities. These communities are rural and urban. They are located in large cities and small and are found all over the nation. These environmental justice communities include communities of color, coastal communities, and low-income communities. The common thread for these communities is that they do not have equal access to a safe and healthy environment.

Executive Order 12898 requires agencies across the government to make addressing environmental justice part of their mission. To meet that requirement, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established the Office of Environmental Justice. Today, on our second panel, we will hear from the former head of that EPA office, about what more can be done to strengthen Environmental Justice efforts at EPA.

Unfortunately, a recently released GAO study found that more must be done across agencies to measure progress and ensure they are addressing environmental justice. The author of that report will also testify today, along with current EPA staff.

Another recent report, by the United States Commission on Civil Rights, found EPA has acted too slowly in response to complaints under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and has failed to

involve and protect communities from the dangers of coal ash. The Commission was unable to send someone to testify in person today, but we welcome their written testimony.

We will also have the privilege today to hear from several frontline communities being impacted by legacy pollution and climate change. We will hear first-hand accounts from Puerto Rico, North Carolina and Louisiana. It is critically important that we hear from impacted communities as we work towards legislation to fight climate change and address environmental justice.

I thank all the witnesses for taking the time to be here today, and I thank the Subcommittee Chairman for calling this hearing.