

Opening Statement
Chairman Paul D. Tonko
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy: Opportunities for an Equitable,
LowCarbon Recovery”
September 16, 2020

When we began the 100% Clean Economy hearing series, we set out to identify the challenges and opportunities for our nation to achieve scientifically necessary pollution reduction targets.

Over the past year, we have heard from experts about how to achieve these goals while strengthening our economy, creating new jobs and industries, modernizing our infrastructure, and addressing historic environmental injustices, all while transitioning every sector to a low-carbon future.

When we began this work, we had a pretty good idea that wildfires, hurricanes, and extreme heat— all exacerbated by our changing climate— were serious threats to Americans’ lives and our near- and long-term economic outlook.

But we had no way of foreseeing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Closures due to COVID-19 have led to manufacturing reductions, supply chain disruptions, and decreased installation of clean energy and energy efficiency technologies.

Prior to COVID-19, clean energy sectors were adding jobs at twice the rate of overall U.S. employment.

Today over half a million clean energy workers have lost their jobs.

And undoubtedly, the pandemic has shed light on systemic inequities.

Many of the people that have been most likely to lose their lives to COVID are also more likely to be unemployed because of it, more likely to experience harmful pollution in their communities, and most at risk to the dangers caused by climate change.

It has never been more obvious that our collective climate response, future economic prosperity, and commitment to building a more just and equitable society are intertwined.

As we continue to consider how these goals should be achieved given our current circumstances, I believe it starts with targeting Federal investments to ensure that an economic recovery and clean energy transition will benefit workers and frontline communities, while delivering a healthier and more resilient environment for all Americans.

Throughout the 116th Congress, this Subcommittee has heard many ideas to do just that.

Programs in the Committee's jurisdiction can support the creation of American jobs, especially in labor-intensive sectors like construction and manufacturing.

This isn't some unrealistic dream. There are real and existing programs that can be leveraged.

We just need to increase the scale of our ambition and the depth of our commitment.

This includes investments to modernize the grid, retrofit buildings, manufacture clean vehicles, develop a modern energy workforce, and research innovative technologies.

These efforts can also make us more resilient to unforeseen disruptions, like COVID.

For example, building domestic, low-carbon manufacturing capacity can shorten supply chains while creating new jobs in emerging industries.

These were ideas included in our comprehensive climate plan last year, and they make just as much sense today given their climate and economic benefits.

And it may surprise some people, but in recent years, we've worked on a bipartisan basis on many important components of such a plan— to support redevelopment of brownfields, remediation of Superfund sites, and improvements to water systems.

These types of programs can be at the heart of our nation's recovery to put people to work modernizing and climatizing our infrastructure while reducing pollution, especially in frontline communities.

Putting Americans back to work should be a top priority, but that is not the only important metric.

We need to ensure that the jobs we are creating are of a high quality.

We need to create a support system for workforce development and training that isn't just putting people into transitional jobs, but into long-term careers.

We need to make strategic and sustained investments to develop new industries that will employ Americans for decades to come.

And we need to make sure these investments reach all communities.

While the need for action is as urgent as ever, we can be confident that this approach can have a meaningful impact.

Much of the clean energy progress made in the past decade can trace its origins back to the historic investments of the Recovery Act.

The costs of solar, wind, LEDs, and lithium-ion batteries have declined at an unthinkable rate, supported by those investments and incentives.

Those investments created jobs while having long-term benefits—technology breakthroughs from ARPA-E, deployment of smart meters, and the first carbon capture demonstration projects, to name just a few.

We are approaching 200,000 COVID deaths, and meanwhile millions are unemployed, and we continue to see terrifying images of wildfires from the west and hurricanes from the gulf.

At our first hearing of the 116th Congress, I suggested that we were at an inflection point, and how our Committee responds in this moment will define our nation for the next half century and beyond.

This is truer today than ever before.

I look forward to today's discussion of the tremendous opportunities available to put Americans back to work in the short-term while realizing the long-term benefits of a cleaner, more resilient, more competitive, and more just economy.