



WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF

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HEARING ON

**"Back in Action: Restoring Federal Climate Leadership"
Subcommittee on Environment & Climate Change
Committee on Energy and Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives**

Good morning Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, Chairman Tonko, and Ranking Member McKinley. It is wonderful to join you today to discuss the restoration of our nation's federal climate leadership and how it is inextricably tied to addressing environmental justice. My name is Kerene Tayloe and I am Director of Federal Legislative Affairs for WE ACT for Environmental Justice.

WE ACT was founded more than 30 years ago in response to the overt environmental racism impacting our community in West Harlem. Since then, WE ACT has grown into an organization of more than 15 staff and has offices in New York City and Washington, D.C. We are one of the first people of color-led EJ organizations in New York State and are the only grassroots EJ organization with a *permanent* presence in D.C.



Today I've been asked to discuss the early action that is needed by Congress to address the climate crisis and environmental injustices. In my testimony, I will offer three high-level recommendations.

First, to address the climate crisis, Congress must pass equitable and just legislation that will provide tangible benefits to communities targeted by pollution. As a starting point, I urge Congress to pass the *Environmental Justice for All Act* that was introduced by Natural Resources Committee Chair Raúl Grijalva and Congressman Donald McEachin. This comprehensive bill reflects more than a year of engagement with grassroots environmental justice advocates and, more importantly, it requires consideration of cumulative impacts in permitting decisions under the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act. This provision will ensure the protection of human health in communities that are inundated with industrial toxic emissions. The bill also codifies Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice, originally signed by President Clinton, directing federal agencies to create a working group on environmental justice compliance and enforcement - something that is long overdue.

Second, we must address legacy pollution. Last year a study from the Shriver Center on Poverty Law found that 70 percent of hazardous waste sites on the National Priorities List are located within 1 mile of federally assisted housing.¹ Additionally, a Harvard University study found that counties with high exposures to particulate matter

¹Shriver Center on Poverty Law. Poisonous Homes: The Fight for Environmental Justice in Federally Assisted Housing. 3 Nov. 2020, www.povertylaw.org/report/poisonoushomes/.



also experienced high COVID-19 mortality rates.² This data indicates that substantial investments into the remediation of superfund sites, brownfields, abandoned coal mines, former defense sites, and lead pipe replacement are desperately needed. Last Congress, WE ACT endorsed *The Environmental Justice Legacy Pollution Cleanup Act*, sponsored by Senator Cory Booker and Representative Deb Haaland. This bill will invest \$100 billion to clean up legacy pollution sites across the nation. I acknowledge that this is a substantial amount of money, but in order to address historic environmental injustices...we need bold action, particularly to make up for decades of federal inaction that has permitted industry to pollute without repercussions. WE ACT will continue to support *The Environmental Justice Legacy Pollution Cleanup Act*, and we hope that each member of the Energy & Commerce Committee will co-sponsor the bill once it is re-introduced.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn national attention to both the environmental and economic hardships that everyone, but especially communities of color or low income, are experiencing. The clean energy sector in the United States lost 429,000 jobs last year due to the economic impacts of COVID-19. That's 12 percent of the sector's workforce since March - with women, Black, and Hispanic workers disproportionately impacted. Long before the concept of a Green New Deal and Build

² Wu, X., et al. "Air Pollution and COVID-19 Mortality in the United States: Strengths and Limitations of an Ecological Regression Analysis." *Science Advances*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1 Nov. 2020, advances.sciencemag.org/content/6/45/eabd4049?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosfutureofwork&stream=future.



Back Better held the attention of our country, environmental justice leaders understood that we must connect the need to remediate our communities to good paying jobs. At WE ACT, our own Solar Uptown Now program has trained more than 125 local residents in solar installation. Since 2012 WE ACT has helped more than 2,000 residents get OSHA cards and begin careers in the construction industry.

However, beyond community training, there must be a federal push to encourage and expedite the transition to good-paying green energy jobs to regain ground we lost due to the pandemic.³ We must also address the failures of our education system and incorporate climate literacy in our public schools. Teenagers in the United States continue to lag behind their peers in East Asia and Europe in reading, math and science according to a report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). To make matters worse, Latinx and African-American students are less likely to pass Algebra 1 and less likely to attend high schools that offer advanced math or science classes than their white and Asian peers, according to new data released by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights.⁴ How can we address the climate crisis and create good paying green jobs if we are not equipping all children with the skills needed to get the certifications required to install solar and wind

³ Moriah Balingit, Andrew Van Dam. "U.S. Students Continue to Lag behind Peers in East Asia and Europe in Reading, Math and Science, Exams Show." The Washington Post, WP Company, 5 Dec. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/us-students-continue-to-lag-behind-peers-in-east-asia-and-europe-in-reading-math-and-science-exams-show/2019/12/02/e9e3b37c-153d-11ea-9110-3b34ce1d92b1_story.html.

⁴ Jones, Carolyn. "Latino, African-Americans Have Less Access to Math, Science Classes, New Data Show." EdSource, EdSource, 29 Oct. 2019, edsources.org/2018/latino-african-americans-have-less-access-to-math-science-classes-new-data-show/598083.



technology? We support bills like Congressman Bobby Rush's *Blue Collar to Green Collar Jobs Development Act*, which would reauthorize and expand the Department of Energy's Office of Minority Economic Impact to improve the education and training of underrepresented groups for employment in energy-related industries, including manufacturing, engineering, construction and retrofitting jobs. Of particular interest is the bill's emphasis on grants to schools and nonprofit organizations like ours who already have workforce development and solar training programs. We have made a great impact on our community, but if funded at scale, we could do much much more.

These suggestions only scratch the surface of what is needed to bring climate and environmental justice to our communities. For more in-depth policy suggestions, I would like to submit the following documents to the hearing record:

1. WE ACT's 2021 Policy Agenda.
2. A report from the Environmental Justice Leadership Forum entitled, *Creating a Green Workforce, Community-Based Solutions for a Diverse Green Jobs Sector*.
3. WE ACT's Extreme Heat Policy Agenda, released in 2020.

Thank you for your time and for inviting me to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.