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The National Environmental Justice For All Tour Message

THE MESSAGE

“Congress must act to reform environmental laws and agencies that are harming people of color and poor communities across America with severely toxic chemicals, hazardous manufacturing and waste disposal, and destructive energy production.”

THE PROBLEM

Unequal Government Response Is Unfair

There is an unequal response by the government to health and safety concerns facing certain Americans. All Americans deserve to feel secure in their homes and communities, but people of color and poor communities are more threatened by toxic pollution than others. Hurricane Katrina is only the latest stark example of how people of color get inadequate response by government. One year after Katrina, African Americans, Native Americans, poor whites, and others are still without homes and living in chemically contaminated conditions that threaten their health and well-being. The chemicals unleashed by the demolished homes of the Gulf and spread throughout the flooded area are the same as those that have been proven to cause severe health impacts in firefighters and first-responders to the World Trade Center attacks. Yet Congress has failed to take adequate steps to ensure people living in the flooded areas are safe.

Five years after 9/11 and Congress has failed to secure power plants, chemical and pesticide plants, oil refineries and wastewater treatment plants and chemical weapons stockpiles that could become the next terrorist target. Studies prove that these facilities are disproportionately located in poor communities and communities of color and that explosions or accidents will gravely imperil people living nearby and workers inside. Yet Congress fails to protect these vulnerable populations.

Terrorized By Toxic Chemicals

At a time when our government says its priority is homeland security, our communities are being terrorized by toxic chemicals. Many of the chemicals present in our air, water and food are invisible to the eye, but the impacts on the health of workers and our families are clear. The industry and government regulators should be working hand in hand with us to prevent this toxic terrorism, but instead seem to be protecting industry's right to pollute. We need government that is accountable to the people, not big money polluters.

Health Problems

Asthma and cancer diagnoses have risen to epidemic proportions. Thousands of children are suffering from asthma attacks that keep them on the sidelines of life. Yet Congress and EPA repeatedly fail to protect these children from the toxic triggers that lead to their attacks. Seemingly healthy adults are struck with cancer diagnoses while chemicals known to cause cancer and other diseases are routinely pumped into our air, water, and consumer products and sprayed on our food.

Diesel

Air pollution from diesel vehicles can contain lung irritants including more than 40 air toxics, cancer-causing chemicals, and fine particle soot. These tiny particles are inhaled deep in the lungs, where they can trigger asthma, premature death, heart attacks, and a variety of respiratory problems. Diesel pollution is a health issue for everyone but an equity issue for some. Environmental justice communities are often most impacted by diesel because those neighborhoods, playgrounds, houses of worship and schools are located nearest to polluting sources, such as truck traffic in neighborhoods and highways, trains in switch yards, ships and equipment in marine ports, diesel vehicles in city construction sites, and school and transit buses. Yet despite this undue burden, Congress and EPA have failed to require that all diesel vehicles be fitted with new high tech mufflers that would reduce pollution by up to 90%.

THE SOLUTIONS

Community, state and national groups part of the 40 city Environmental Justice for All Tour are advocating for equal protection of all who live, play, work, and pray in America. Security issues such as access to drinkable water, clean air and safe communities must be addressed by Congress through reform of environmental laws and the agencies meant to enforce them.

Locating polluting plants and chemical transport away from residential communities are examples of some solutions that will protect communities and workers.

Relocating residents who wish to move away from chemical facilities and oil refineries should be a priority.

Eliminating dangerous chemical stockpiles and switching to safer chemicals at manufacturing sites and water treatment plants are other examples of solutions.

Mandating all diesel vehicles nationwide be retrofitted with pollution reduction equipment will prevent 90% of the pollution currently released. New Jersey recently passed such a law and expects to reduce diesel emissions by more than 500 tons per year and save New Jersey up to \$1.4 billion annually in health care and diesel-pollution related costs.

Switching to available non-toxic alternatives for many consumer products that now contain lead, arsenic, and mercury is an immediate answer to reducing toxic exposure.

Using environmental monitoring equipment to determine what hazards exist in our homes and workplaces will allow us to take immediate action to protect workers and families.

By using currently available safer technologies we can destroy our stockpiled military and industrial wastes without creating additional major health risks.

Simple conservation efforts and investment in sustainable energy will save our mountains, forests, coastlines and urban centers from irreversible harm.

And industry should commit to switching to less toxic substances to relieve communities of the burden of toxic railcar shipments and potential accidents and explosions from manufacturing.

Corporate special interests are fighting these solutions and claiming they'll harm the economy. But a good economy is based on safe jobs, safe communities and healthy people. We only have to look at 9/11 to remember that negligence in the protection of some hurts all of America. And we have the ongoing tragedy of Katrina to remind us that to live up to the promise of America, government must do better in the protection of all.

THE TOUR MESSAGE AND ELECTIONS

As we think ahead to the November elections, we must ask ourselves: who among the candidates will stand up for the health and well-being of us all? Who among the candidates is brave enough to search for solutions, implement innovative ideas, and eradicate environmental racism and classism? We need leaders who have the courage to commit to environmental justice for all.