



Opening Statement of Chair Kathy Castor
Hearing on “Creating a Climate Resilient America: Overcoming the Health Risks of the
Climate Crisis”
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
February 5, 2020

As prepared for delivery

The climate crisis is making air pollution worse and, as temperatures rise, the public health suffers. Today we will explore the harms of the growing health impacts related to the climate crisis and what we can do about it.

One of our most important responsibilities as elected representatives is to keep our constituents safe. Congress has worked to keep Americans healthy, whether it’s by protecting our drinking water, investing in life-saving medical research, or expanding access to health care.

While America has been fueled over the past two centuries by burning coal, oil and gas, over time those fuel sources have harmed public health. And now it’s getting worse. The number and gravity of cases of heart and lung disease, asthma, extended allergy seasons, and the impacts of extreme heat are on the rise. And climate-aggravated illnesses are having a disproportionate impact on children, seniors and on our neighbors who work outside.

The science could not be clearer. The climate crisis is making Americans sicker, exposing them to stronger heat waves, dangerous wildfires, floods, droughts, and climate-fueled disasters. The changing climate is also altering the patterns of infectious diseases, making warm seasons longer, and threatening food security across the world. Unless we take bold climate action, global surface temperatures will continue to rise, making these risks even more dangerous.

But science also tells us that we can do something about it. We can reduce carbon pollution, increase energy efficiency, and move toward a clean energy economy. We can strengthen clean air and clean water protections. And we can solve this crisis by taking bold, urgent action to protect the health of all Americans. Curbing pollution can literally save lives and save America hundreds of billions of dollars.

The World Health Organization estimates that the climate crisis could cause nearly 250,000 additional deaths globally every year, due to health risks associated with malnutrition, heat stress and other health effects. And warmer temperatures can make it more challenging to battle infectious diseases. Dangerous illnesses like Lyme disease and malaria are borne through fleas, ticks and mosquitoes, which can thrive when we have longer and hotter summers, shorter winters, and earlier spring seasons.

The climate crisis also puts the health of workers at risk. As we will hear, it can be particularly dangerous for farm workers, the folks who help grow the food that ends up on our dinner tables. Rising temperatures will make sustained work increasingly difficult for millions of workers, with temperatures regularly breaching physiological limits.

Solving this crisis is also about protecting our kids and grandchildren, as well as our aging parents and grandparents. Children have a higher risk of heat stroke and illness than adults, while older adults are vulnerable to extreme weather events that can cause power outages and require evacuations. In recent years, wildfires have left communities choking on smoke even when fires are miles away. We've seen the deadly disruption of health care delivery during and after infamous storms like Katrina, Sandy, Harvey, Maria and Michael. Those storms left healthcare facilities damaged, medical professionals displaced and patients struggling to get needed care.

While all Americans are at risk of suffering from climate-fueled health problems, some populations are more vulnerable than others. Working class families, for example, face higher risks when floodwaters overtake their neighborhoods, bringing the mental strain of dealing with a disaster and carrying dangerous pathogens that put them at risk of physical illness. Decades of discrimination also have exposed working class communities and communities of color to extreme heat, putting them on the front lines of the climate crisis. As we discuss climate solutions today, it's clear we must emphasize environmental justice for these vulnerable Americans.

Congress shouldn't wait until it's too late for us to act on climate. We can turn things around, reduce climate impacts, and protect our communities. But the time to follow the science and act is now.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panel of witnesses.