

Opening Statement of Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

June 9, 2020

Today, we're continuing this Committee's work to combat the COVID-19 pandemic by looking at its disproportionate impact on environmental justice communities. It's heartbreaking to think that more than 100,000 Americans have died from this horrible virus.

It's also alarming to see the devastatingly high rates of infection and death for communities of color, low-income communities, Native American communities, and fence-line communities. For example, communities that are adjacent to chemical plants or superfund sites.

We often refer to these communities as environmental justice communities, because they are the ones most in need of environmental justice. For too long, the people living in these communities have borne a disproportionate share of pollution and its health risks. It is these risks that are contributing to people of color dying from the coronavirus at significantly higher rates than others.

We have long known that particulate matter and other forms of air pollution cause respiratory disease, including asthma. We have also known that low income communities and communities of color are exposed to higher concentrations of air pollution because, for years, polluters have chosen to build their facilities in these communities. As a result, low-income Americans and people of color suffer greater incidence of respiratory disease and other adverse health effects. And now, we have scientific evidence showing a direct link between communities living with more air pollution and high rates of COVID-19 deaths.

We simply cannot allow this to continue, and unfortunately, the Trump Administration is only making this public health and environmental crisis worse. When the Trump Administration rolls back protections under the Clean Air Act it hurts these communities most. When this Administration announces that it will not enforce some environmental laws and regulations during the pandemic, that hurts these communities, too. And when President Trump issues an executive order circumventing the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, that completely cuts the voices of these communities out of the decision-making process.

This Subcommittee continues to focus on fighting for environmental justice. Representative Ruiz led the effort to increase environmental justice grants in response to COVID-19, as part of the HEROES Act, which passed the House last month. Representative McEachin, the coauthor of that bill, has also been a leader in developing other comprehensive legislation on environmental and climate justice.

I also want to thank Chairmen Tonko and Rush for working with me to include an environmental justice section in our CLEAN Future Act that we unveiled in January.

This hearing is happening at a truly crucial moment in our nation's history. We're fighting a global pandemic, while tens of millions of Americans have lost their jobs and peaceful protestors are demanding racial justice following the murder of George Floyd. We have a lot of work to do.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us today. It is imperative that we listen to the needs of environmental justice communities as part of our ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We should all be committed to pursuing environmental justice and ensuring a safe environment for all Americans.