

Opening Statement  
Chairman Paul D. Tonko  
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
Hearing on “Pollution and Pandemics: COVID-19’s Disproportionate Impact on Environmental  
Justice Communities”  
June 9, 2020

We know the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and, in many cases, worsened longstanding environmental injustices.

Communities exposed to particulate matter and other air pollutants that cause asthma, C.O.P.D., and other respiratory illnesses are now at even greater risk of death from COVID-19, a devastating illness that we know is disproportionately affecting minority and low-income communities.

According to a recent CDC analysis, African Americans represented 33 percent of COVID hospitalized patients, and nearly a quarter of COVID deaths, despite only comprising 18 percent of the communities studied. These disparities are even greater in certain communities.

EPA has taken numerous deregulatory actions over the past three and a half years, including adopting a non-enforcement policy during the pandemic, leaving many communities wondering who, if anyone, will stand up to protect their health and safety from very real and lasting harm.

Our members of this Subcommittee have made environmental justice a top priority, and we are committed to ensuring environmental justice is central to our work moving forward.

I want to recognize and thank several of our Subcommittee members. In particular, Dr. Ruiz and Mr. McEachin, who fought to include language in the Heroes Act to codify EPA’s environmental justice grant program and provide up to \$50 million to build capacity of Environmental Justice community groups.

The Heroes Act also requires states and utilities receiving federal emergency funds to take steps to prevent water and energy shutoffs for the duration of the COVID-19 emergency and establishes a new program to help people with payments for drinking water and wastewater expenses. I want to recognize Mrs. Dingell for her leadership on these vital measures.

These are good and important policies, but this work is nowhere close to done. Communities that have long faced the worst injustices continue to suffer more air pollution and vulnerability to our changing climate.

Our approach must be equal to this challenge, building a comprehensive strategy that works to restore environmental justice for communities of color and low-income neighborhoods.

Today, we will hear from experts on how COVID is impacting communities that already face disproportionate harms from pollution.

We welcome Ms. Patterson and Mr. Shays to the Subcommittee, and welcome back Mr. Ali.

Thank you for grounding us in this timely and necessary discussion.

As we grapple with our national history— and present— of systemic racism, we need to deepen our awareness of our environmental policies and their disproportional consequences.

There is a reason we call this convening a “hearing.” As Members of Congress, we need to listen. Listen to the communities who have felt these unfair, unjust impacts for decades. Listen to the experts who have done this work for years and are best prepared to offer meaningful perspectives and material solutions.

And we must resolve to hear them and then act accordingly to address these longstanding harms.

I look forward to hearing your perspectives on the intersection of environmental justice and COVID-19, and I yield the remaining time to one of the great leaders in Congress on these issues, the Subcommittee Vice Chair Dr. Ruiz.