

Testimony of Mustafa Santiago Ali
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**Before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce's Subcommittee on
Environment and Climate Change**
**Hearing on “*Pollution and Pandemics Covid-19's Disproportionate Impacts on
Communities*”**

Tuesday, June 9, 2020

Chairman Paul Tonko, Ranking Member Shimkus and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the National Wildlife Federation, our 52 state and territorial affiliates, more than 6 million members, and environmental justice communities across our country, thank you for the honor of testifying before you today.

Today's hearing comes at a critical moment in the history of our country. Front-line communities are under attack from multiple emergencies happening at the same time. Black communities are dealing with the systemic racism that has infected the policing in our communities that is literally choking us to death. The rolling back of environmental rules and regulations has us gasping for air due to the cumulative public health impacts from the burning of fossil fuels in our communities. Covid-19 continues to devastate black, brown and indigenous communities both in infections and deaths. When we say, “I Can't Breathe” we literally can't breathe.

Over 2.0 million Americans have been infected with the coronavirus and over 113,000 have died. Communities of Color across our nation health and wealth are being impacted by the burning of fossil fuels that is a significant driver in the climate crisis and the impacts from the corona virus that we find ourselves dealing with. 500,000 homeless citizens of our country are also at risk from both air pollution and the lack of clean accessible water which is critical to both personal hygiene and the ability to protect one's self from covid-19 infection.

The last time I joined you I shared that, disproportionately the majority of fossil fuel facilities are located in communities of color, lower wealth communities and on Indigenous lands. The 2.4 million miles of pipeline crisscrossing our country travels through Indigenous and Farm country and ends up on the gulf coast in vulnerable communities who often have to bare the burdens of toxic exposures.

In our country we have over 100,000 people who are losing their lives each year prematurely to air pollution, that's more folks dying from toxic air than from gun violence. We have 25 million with asthma and 7 million kids. Many of our communities of color and lower-income communities are literally dying for a breath of fresh air. We know that many of the communities who are closely located to toxic facilities suffer from chronic medical conditions: heart, liver, kidney and lung disease, as well as cancers. We also know that these chronic medical conditions make people more susceptible to the corona virus. Unfortunately, these are the communities who

are also in medically underserved areas, which compounds the impacts by making it difficult to access proper medical advice and treatment.

To add additional insult to injury the Trump administration decided to stop enforcing environmental laws due to the pandemic. The current administration has also diligently been weakening US environment protections even amid the corona virus crisis by rolling back the clean car rule and instituting an Executive Order to weaken the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Each of these current actions and a list of previous actions makes overburdened **communities more vulnerable, today and in the future.**

In 2018 EPA's National Center for Environmental Assessment shared a study focusing on particulate matter with the country that highlighted the fact that people of color are much more likely to live near polluters and breathe polluted air. The study went on to share that people in poverty are exposed to more fine particulate matter than people living above poverty.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer named particulate matter as a known definite carcinogen, and it's been named by the EPA as a contributor to a number of significant health conditions, heart attacks, lung conditions, high blood pressure, low birth weight in babies and asthma.

The National Center for Environmental Assessment found that black people are exposed to about 1.5 times more particulate matter than white people, and that Hispanics had about 1.2 times the exposure of non-Hispanic whites. The study found that people in poverty had about 1.3 times more exposure than people above poverty.

In 2016 Environment International highlighted a study that concluded long-term exposure to the pollutant pm2.5 is associated with racial segregation, with more highly segregated areas suffering higher levels of exposure.

These are just a few of the studies that show a correlation between air pollution and the impacts on communities of color. This also raises the question why would any administration weaken environmental standards that would put additional lives in danger?

These rollbacks play out in neighborhoods like the 48217 in Southwest Detroit where 1.6 million pounds of hazardous pollution is released each year from billowing smokestacks above schoolyards and day care centers, as they live in the shadow of the Marathon refinery. The exposures to these emissions place the residents at a greater risk from the virus. We know this from the recently released Harvard study which highlighted the fact that a small increase in long-term exposure to PM_{2.5} leads to 8% increases in the COVID-19 death rates.

African-Americans make up 13 percent of the country's population and they make up 26 percent of deaths related to COVID-19. We see these elevated rates of infections and deaths in places that have a long history with being pollution dumping grounds like Trenton, NJ, Cancer Alley in Louisiana, and Chicago's south side to name a few hot spots.

There are communities like the Manchester community in Houston, Texas and Port Arthur Texas surrounded by Petrochemical industries as far as the eye can see and each and every day the residents in these communities feel like they are breathing gasoline fumes and they are being disproportionately impacted by the virus.

We cannot forget the freedmen communities like Africa town in Alabama, founded by freed slaves who have been fighting against the impacts of the fossil fuel industry with their lives, as they are inundated with numerous immunosuppressant diseases and breathing difficulties to just name a few of the health impacts faced by our most vulnerable areas and neighborhoods. If this was not enough they now have to also deal with the additional impacts on their communities from both the corona virus and climate change.

These communities which have been the sacrifice zones for pollution are now also ground zero for the corona virus, and many of the storms, floods and other climatic events which we have witnessed over the past few years. In Princeville, NC also founded by freed slaves have been hit by not one but two major floods connected to hurricanes. Houston and Port Arthur, TX also severely damaged by Hurricane Harvey. The communities that have done the least to contribute to the warming of the planet are paying the greatest price. Many have still not been able to return to their neighborhoods to rebuild their homes, businesses and clinics that are critical at this time.

For all of the impacts that continue to happen in frontline communities there is a pathway forward. We can lessen many of these impacts both in our communities and on our planet by moving forward with a just and equitable transition from fossil fuels, where no one gets left behind and we lower the emissions that are playing a role in Covid-19 impacts and moving us toward a climate emergency tipping point.

Renewable energy jobs were booming across America, creating stable and high-wage employment for blue-collar workers in some of the country's most fossil fuel-heavy states, just as the coal industry is poised for another downturn.

Economics are driving both sides of this equation: Building new renewable energy is cheaper than running existing coal plants as prices get cheaper every year. By 2025, almost every existing coal plant in the United States will cost more to operate than building replacement wind and solar within 35 miles of each plant.

Multiple states and utilities are setting 100% clean energy goals, creating new demand for workers to build solar panels and wind turbines. Planning for the inevitable coal-to-clean economic transition can create new economic opportunities in every corner of the country – and some forward-thinking policymakers are already heeding this lesson.

With the development of this new economy we must ensure that our most vulnerable communities who have been impacted by the pollution of the fossil fuel industry, the devastating effects of Covid-19 and climate impacts, can fully participate in this new set of opportunities.

The renewable energy industry has become a major U.S. employer. E2's recent Clean Jobs America report found nearly 3.3 million Americans working in clean energy – outnumbering fossil fuel workers by 3-to-1.

Nearly 335,000 people work in the solar industry and more than 111,000 work in the wind industry, compared to 211,000 working in coal mining or other fossil fuel extraction. Clean energy employment grew 3.6% in 2018, adding 110,000 net new jobs (4.2% of all jobs added nationally in 2018), and employers expect 6% job growth in 2019. (Forbes 2019)

Frontline communities from the streets to the suites are addressing the disproportionate impacts happening in their communities, creating new economic opportunities and lowering the impacts of climate change, that is something that Democrats, Republicans and Independents should be able to support, because it just makes common sense and makes our country stronger and helps us to restart our economy in a way that benefits all our residents.

- New Alpha Development in Florence, SC has been conducting train the trainer events with lower-income residents. Over 100 people have now been trained on solar installation and they are now training Farmers who are trying to lower their electricity cost to maximize their shrinking profitability. They are also addressing food insecurity by growing local produce and providing it to their local food pantry.
- Across New York City, low-income tenants pay up to 13% of their income on traditional energy from fossil fuels. They also bear some of the highest burdens of climate change. Solar energy is one of the fastest ways to move communities from surviving to thriving. To grow solar in northern Manhattan, WE ACT has launched Solar Uptown Now, a campaign to bring northern Manhattan community members together to purchase solar as a group. The Solar Uptown Now model helps customers choose a solar installer that offers competitive, transparent pricing. Purchasing solar as a group helps to bring down the cost of solar installation for all participants.¹
- Ivanhoe Community in Kansas City, which was once ravished by drugs and guns, unhealthy housing, illegal dumps, lack of green space and was a food desert. The community now has an urban farm, and a weekly farmers market – which significantly decreases the distance residents have to travel for fresh food. They've cleaned up the illegal dumps and replaced them with parks and play grounds & they have new energy efficient homes for seniors and new and existing members of this thriving community.
- NYC-Environmental Justice Alliance, a 20+ year old organization that works relentlessly towards environmental and social equity in the city of New York by supporting the work of specific community organizations. One such organization is UPROSE, Brooklyn's Sunset Park coalition, which has been working since the 1960s. With their motto, "Manufacturing Zones are the Engine of a Just Transition," they propose Sunset Park's

¹ <https://www.weact.org/en/campaigns/solaruptownnow/>

industrial zoning as a potential site for manufacturing and assembling renewable energy parts. This would keep renewable energy jobs local and place power and decision-making within the Sunset Park community, which is rapidly changing as it faces the effects of mega-gentrification. UPROSE is currently planning for community residents to become the first cooperative members in the nearby solar farm, which they have slated for completion by winter of 2020.²

- ReGenesis Project in Spartanburg, SC once dealing with the impacts from Brownfields & Superfund sites, Toxic facilities, Non-Energy efficient housing, Medically underserved area, lack of jobs and a number of other impacts. After receiving a \$20,000 environmental justice small grant have been able to leverage that into over \$270,000,000 in positive changes in their community. 500 new green and energy efficient homes, new transportation routes, new medical facilities and mobile health care units, new super market and a community center where seniors and youth come together. They are also moving forward on a 35-acre solar farm to zero out resident's electricity costs (which also helps the environment by lowering greenhouse gas emissions) as well as breaking ground on an Aquaponics and Hydroponics center.

Projects that restore natural systems also create jobs. Restore America's Estuaries reports that coastal restoration "can create more than 30 jobs for each million dollars invested" which is "more than twice as many jobs as the oil and gas and road construction industries combined."

- In Louisiana, a proposed \$72 million project to restore a 30,000-acre expanse of degraded marsh near downtown New Orleans known as the Central Wetlands Unit would create 689 jobs (280 direct jobs and 400 indirect and induced jobs) over the project's life.¹⁴ Implementation of the entire \$25 billion dollars of restoration in Louisiana's Master Plan over the next fifty years would multiply those jobs hundreds of times over. In Florida, restoration of the Everglades will produce more than 442,000 jobs over the next 50 years and almost 23,000 short- to mid-term jobs for the actual restoration work. Restoring the Everglades is also predicted to produce a return of four dollars for each dollar invested.³

These are just a few examples of how change can happen when we support community driven solutions that help our economies and our planet. Yes, we can help our "Most Vulnerable Communities Move from Surviving to Thriving" in Appalachia, The Rust Belt, on the Gulf Coast and in areas across our nation. We can also ensure that communities of color no longer have to worry about taking their last breath due to inhumane policies and actions. In the words of my grandmother, "When You Know Better, Do Better."

² <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/blog/a-limited-guide-to-navigating-a-transition-to-renewables-and-avoiding-the-sharks>

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<https://books.google.com/books?id=0sO3tHPX4hwC&pg=PA69&dq=Everglades%20will%20produce%20more%20than%20442%2C000%20jobs%20over%20the%20next%2050%20years%20and%20almost%2023%2C000%20short-%20to&pg=PA69#v=onepage&q=Everglades%20will%20produce%20more%20than%20442,000%20jobs%20over%20the%20next%2050%20years%20and%20almost%2023,000%20short-%20to&f=false>