



COMMITTEE ON  
**SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY**  
REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

## **Opening Statement of Ranking Member Frank Lucas**

### **Full Committee Hearing**

#### *Sweltering in Place: COVID-19, Extreme Heat, and Environmental Justice*

July 14, 2020

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Thank you, Chairwoman Johnson. As we continue to fight COVID-19, I appreciate that we're focusing our hearing time on this pandemic.

Environmental justice, public health, and extreme weather are very serious topics that deserve our attention. It's well documented that low-income and minority communities are adversely affected by these issues. And while I appreciate the effort to better understand why and how that is, I think the structure and scope of today's hearing doesn't give us the chance to focus on potential solutions.

Sadly, we know that extreme weather, environmental quality, and public health all have a disproportionate effect on low-income and vulnerable populations. I've seen it firsthand with rural communities and tribal lands in my Oklahoma district. It's important we recognize that and have an upfront discussion on it. But in addition to having that discussion, we have a responsibility to try to solve the challenges we face. One of the reasons I love the Science Committee is our focus on solutions. We are the most forward-thinking Committee, and we have the ability to support and shape our country's path forward.

That's why I would have liked to have seen a witness from EPA's Office of Environmental Justice at this hearing. If we're talking about environmental justice and the disparities of environmental effects, we need to know what's being done and how we can improve on it. No one outside of that office can adequately walk us through their \$9.5 million budget – one that my Democratic friends have just proposed increasing by almost 50% I might add.

Like all things in government, EPA's Office of Environmental Justice is not perfect and there are certainly things that could be improved. But this is the office that will facilitate nationwide environmental justice solutions. They should be here today to discuss that. EPA has funded over \$33 million in environmental justice grants to more than 1,400 vulnerable communities. It's giving \$1 million in grant funding to states, local governments, tribes, and U.S. territories to help local environmental justice communities address COVID-19 concerns. And EPA has also requested \$18 million as a set-aside within the Brownfields Projects program to support Opportunity Zone development.

Opportunity Zones are a new community investment tool to encourage long-term investments in low-income urban and rural communities nationwide. It's easy to just talk facts and figures on the economic hardship communities have faced during this pandemic and the long-term

health effects they have historically battled. But it's much more difficult to discuss concrete solutions.

For instance, we have to be careful of trying to address extreme weather by implementing emissions standards that will inevitably raise energy prices. Low-income families spend a disproportionate amount on energy costs, and any increase can affect their entire budget, not to mention their ability to heat or cool their homes.

So while solutions require careful discussion, I think we can all agree that investment and development is the best starting point. That is exactly what Opportunity Zones are designed to do. Over \$10 billion has been raised for investment as of April 30, and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin estimates Opportunity Zones could drive as much as \$100 billion into struggling communities over the coming decade. If you take this initiative and connect it to our Committee, you'll see there is the potential for universities and scientific institutions to commercialize research, support technology transfer, incubate student startups, and expand student housing near Opportunity Zones.

Those are just two of many areas that had the potential to offer solutions to today's hearing. And before any of my friends on the other side point out the witness process, I want to say the minority elected to not invite a witness out of respect to whoever it might have been. If we chose an Opportunity Zone expert, they would not be able to discuss public health or COVID. If we chose a university representative, they would not be able to discuss environmental justice or heat waves.

The minority is given the opportunity to invite a witness to our hearings to allow the Committee to hear differing perspectives on the issues in front of us. But being in the minority means we can only choose a single witness. We take that responsibility seriously and try to invite experts who can speak comprehensively. Today's hearing topic was simply not practical for us to identify one expert. We also do our best to ensure each witness is able to comply with established Committee rules, which includes providing testimony at least 48 hours in advance of the hearing. Yesterday, with 24 hours until the start of this hearing, staff had received just one testimony.

With that being said, I have full faith that the four witnesses with us today are experts in their fields and will do an excellent job discussing the significant issues low income and minority communities are facing. I hope we can hold future hearings with the EPA to focus on forward-looking solutions to these problems. I look forward to the discussion today and yield back.