Testimony of Cecil D. Corbin-Mark Deputy Director of WE ACT for Environmental Justice Before Subcommittee on Environment of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee

Tuesday, July 14, 2020

Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to testify before this committee. My name is Cecil Corbin-Mark and I am the Deputy Director of WE ACT for Environmental Justice (WE ACT). We are a 32-year old environmental justice organization with 1000 dues paying members primarily located in the 15th Congressional District. We have offices in Harlem and Washington, DC. WE ACT's mission is to build healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and/or low-income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices. WE ACT envisions a community that has:

informed and engaged residents who participate fully in decision-making on key issues that impact their health and community.

strong and equal environmental protections.

increased environmental health through community-based participatory research and evidence-based campaigns.

Climate change poses risks to human health

Climate change is here today, it is threatening our health now, and, if left unchecked, will lead to increases in both illnesses and deaths. Immediate action can and must be taken to both mitigate the effects of climate change over time and adapt our communities in ways that reduce the health impacts now to protect our health. WE ACT for Environmental Justice strongly supports measures to reduce carbon pollution and other greenhouse gas emissions from all sectors, including energy production, transportation, health care, forestry, and agriculture.[1] In addition to mitigation efforts, WE ACT believes it is critical that the federal government provide technical assistance, tools and resources to help states, cities and rural communities, territories, and tribes prepare for and protect their communities from the health impacts of climate change.

The fourth National Climate Assessment, which was completed in 2018, details the health impacts of climate change in the United States and says "The health and well-being of Americans are already affected by climate change, with the adverse health consequences projected to worsen with additional climate change. Climate change affects human health by altering exposures to heat waves, floods, droughts, and other extreme events; vector-borne, food-borne and water-borne infectious diseases; changes in the quality and safety of air, food, and water; and stresses to mental health and well-being." In October 2018, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released their latest conclusions, underlining the impact of climate change on the world now and in the future.[2] The report confirms that actions underway now will not be enough to protect against the ongoing and growing risk to public health: more, stronger, faster steps must be taken to further limit warming to below 1.5o C. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change provided strong recommendations of more aggressive actions needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase the use of clean, renewable energy sources. According to the fifth assessment report from the IPCC, warming of the earth over the past century is "unequivocal" and is "unprecedented over decades to millennia.

The most recent National Climate Assessment conducted by the U.S. Global Change Research Program highlights the fact that recent years have seen "record-breaking, climate-related weather extremes, and the last three years have been the warmest years on record for the globe. These trends are expected to continue…" 4 The long-term threat of climate change to health is both serious and urgent, and the IPCC special report, the IPCC fifth assessment, the fourth National Climate Assessment, and other scientific documents demonstrate convincingly that greenhouse gas emissions, due to human activity, are primarily responsible for this threat

Climate change poses many risks to human health. Some health impacts of climate change are already being felt in the United States, including those linked to:

Extreme Heat

Exposure to extreme heat kills more people in the U.S. than any other weather-related threat, and extreme heat events are on the rise. By 2050, one estimate predicts approximately 3,400 more premature deaths each year in the U.S. due to extreme heat.9 The burden of heat-related illness and death disproportionately affects climate-sensitive populations like pregnant women, the young and old, the chronically ill, people of color, low-income families, and outdoor workers.8 Just one heat wave event can cost $179 million in hospitalizations, emergency department encounters, and outpatient visits. Extreme heat events can trigger a variety of other heat-related conditions, from severe dehydration, to heat stroke. High heat conditions can also exacerbate cardiovascular and respiratory disorders, resulting in hospitalization and even premature death. Also, extreme heat is linked to increased aggression, raising the number of assaults, murders, and suicides. The built environment plays a role in the severity of heat-related events because of the urban heat island effect. Climate change can worsen heat effects due to less-reflective, impervious surfaces, which make urban settings more deadly than vegetative, rural communities.13 This issue of land use needs to be more actively addressed as the planet warms. Adaptation also requires considerable emergency planning and risk communications to inform the public, identify people most at risk, and respond with proactive measures to get people out of the heat. This requires a range of community tools such as cooling centers, water distribution, fan and air-conditioning unit distribution, and even relocation of at-risk people. Battling heat-related health threats requires considerable amounts of funding. As extreme heat events become more frequent and intense, health effects will worsen, and health care costs will rise. However, some public health interventions are well worth the investment because they are so cost-effective. For example, Ebi et al. reported that the cost of running a heat–health warning system for Philadelphia was relatively small ($210,000) compared with the benefits of saving 117 lives ($468 million) over the three-year period of 1995–1998.

Air Quality

Air quality is another key issue that WE ACT has worked on for the past three decades because of its impact on environmental justice communities. Climate change affects human health by increasing ground-level ozone and particulate matter air pollution. Ground-level ozone, a key component of smog, is associated with many health problems, including reduced lung function. Air pollution increases the risk of health complications from cardiovascular disease and respiratory conditions like asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Increased carbon dioxide also causes increased pollen potency, leading to a longer and more intense allergy season. Asthma attacks are a major cause of school absenteeism, and, therefore, climate change

has an indirect impact on children's education. This is especially troubling considering the fact that educational attainment is strongly link to improved health.

The cheapest way to reduce the health impact from air pollution is to address the factors that cause it. Major causes of air pollution include the burning of fossil fuels, power plant emissions, and automobile exhausts. Minimizing damage from air pollution is an important step to reduce health impacts and health care costs. It is critical to engage with federal, state, and local officials, planners, and local organizations to better educate residents on air quality and develop community design solutions to improve air quality.

Given the challenge we have a number of suggested policy reforms that can be found in our Heat Health and Equity Policy Platform which can be found [here.](#)

Thank you for your time and attention and I am happy to answer any questions.