

Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
Member Day Testimony of Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy, III
November 14, 2019

Thank you, Chairwoman Castor, for convening this Member Day and for your leadership of this Select Committee on the Climate Crisis.

If we are going to confront a multigenerational crisis like climate change, we must pay close attention to our prior failures.

Not just failed environmental policies and the illogical idea that reducing environmental regulations would somehow encourage fossil fuel companies to protect our air, water and land on their own.

But the reforms that Congress and Administrations have championed for decades that too often left too many clinging to the margins of our nation.

A New Deal that excluded agricultural workers and domestic workers from its benefits and protections.

A National Housing Act that institutionalized redlining and housing discrimination so effectively that it resulted in staggering racial wealth gap that still exists today.

A GI Bill that denied 1.2 million black veterans the same benefits that lifted up millions of white veterans who fought shoulder-to-shoulder in the battlefield.

A War on Drugs where the enemy was far too often young black men rather than the drugs devastating our communities.

A welfare reform bill that implemented work requirements on striving Americans and denied them access to critical anti-poverty programs that would have otherwise lifted them out of poverty.

War. Poverty. Employment. Housing. Justice. All of it shaded by our inability or unwillingness to see entire segments of our society at the moment they needed our help most.

Now, as climate change threatens our very existence, we're dangerously close to repeating the same mistakes of our past.

Wildfires burn thousands of homes in California and we see how effective fire prevention efforts save the Reagan Library and some wealthier mansions while displaced families go homeless because affordable housing is nowhere to be found.

A hurricane that causes increased devastation because of nonexistent zoning laws in Texas garners immediate government attention but one that leaves Puerto Ricans hungry, homeless and helpless receives government derision.

Wealthy beachfront homeowners leverage flood insurance to boost property values on second and third homes while working Americans see their home value crater as sea levels rise.

Nearly 80% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal plant – breathing in toxic chemicals and living with the health consequences of our deference to fossil fuels.

More than 80% of Latinos live in American counties where at least one federal air-pollution law has been violated.

In cities across our country, low-income communities suffer from extreme heat zones and a lack of tree canopy and air conditioning, raising the risks of asthma and heart disease for people already living in areas with limited access to quality, affordable health care.

The climate crisis is intersectional and intergenerational and demands that we acknowledge and address the failures of our past. That's why we must seek more than old ideas of incremental change and instead demand climate justice that looks deeper than the purity of air and water.

Why any carbon tax must be more than a regressive tax passed along to ratepayers as higher costs, but instead an investment into the low-income communities that have been left with the economic and health costs of inaction.

Any plan for green jobs and green energy cannot be allowed to lead to green gentrification that pushes out the residents who have been forced to breathe dirty air and drink harmful water, and instead lifts those working Americans up with careers in this emerging green economy through policies like the Blue Collar to Green Collar Jobs Development Act.

Any tax credits that incent clean energy expansion like offshore wind should be targeted towards corporations that build these emerging sectors in low-income communities, train American workers and create American jobs.

Any structural reforms in how regulators approve energy development should be transparent and accountable to the consumers who will be left with the bill.

And as we make this transition to a new energy future, any existing or proposed energy infrastructure projects must not be approved solely on its individual merit, but how it fits into the broader energy and climate landscape.

Climate change on its own does not discriminate – it targets us all.

But just as human activity undeniably causes climate change – human choices have put communities of color and low-income Americans in its crosshairs.

Now, we are presented with an opportunity. To right the wrongs of our past and do right by the generations that will follow in our footsteps.

Working with this Select Committee, I know we can bring those communities that have been on the frontlines to the forefront of this debate and the policies that will emerge from it.

Thank you.