



**Opening Statement of Chair Kathy Castor
Hearing on “Advancing Environmental Justice Through Climate Action”
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis
July 15, 2021**

As prepared for delivery

During our last Committee hearing, the West faced an unprecedented heat wave – one that shattered temperature records, melted power cables, and tragically took the lives of nearly 200 Americans. The extreme heat capped the hottest June in our nation’s history. And scientists warned it would have been “virtually impossible” without the influence of human-caused climate change. This week, unfortunately, a new and dangerous heat wave is threatening summer crops, sparking wildfires, straining power grids, and putting more lives in danger. And on the East Coast, commuters waded through waist-deep water to reach the New York City subway, after heavy rains flooded underground stations across the city. There is no denying it: we are in a climate crisis. And we must act boldly to keep temperatures in check, as we help our neighborhoods adapt to threats that are already here.

From scorching heat waves to stronger storms, the climate crisis affects each community differently. But its worst effects are felt by Americans in environmental justice communities, which include communities of color, low-income communities, and Indigenous communities. That’s why environmental justice must be at the center of climate action. It’s why environmental justice is a cornerstone of our Climate Crisis Action Plan. And it’s why today we’ll focus on advancing environmental justice through climate action.

Throughout our history, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income Americans have been disproportionately harmed by pollution. And today, they’re more vulnerable to the effects of climate change: Black American children are five times likelier than white children to be admitted to the hospital for asthma. Latinos are twice as likely to live in areas most threatened by wildfires. Communities that have few trees or places to cool off have deadlier outcomes when the weather hits triple digits. Tribes are watching their way of life disrupted by climate-fueled weather extremes, wildlife loss, and sea-level rise. And in Puerto Rico, families are still living with blue plastic tarps over their homes, nearly four years after a hurricane blew away their roofs.

This is not a coincidence. EJ communities have long been harmed by chronic underinvestment and systemic failures that make it harder for them to bounce back after disaster strikes. They’ve also been subject to racist zoning codes, mortgage lending discrimination, and a disproportionate proximity to factories, waste sites, and other sources of pollution. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, taking existing social and economic inequities and making them worse. That’s why

climate action must be centered in righting these wrongs, ensuring we do not repeat the mistakes and injustices of the past. Solving the climate crisis is about more than just reducing pollution. It's about boosting resilience in vulnerable communities. And it's about repairing the legacy of environmental racism. As we expand clean energy and rebuild our infrastructure, we have to be intentional about elevating EJ communities, to make sure these benefits are reaching the most vulnerable Americans.

Thanks to the leadership of colleagues like Rep. McEachin, we've made progress on this front, as we listen to the priorities of EJ communities and translate them into solutions. We passed President Biden's American Rescue Plan, which included critical funding for EJ grant programs at the EPA. We also passed the Invest in America Act, which makes record investments in mass transit; expands funding for water infrastructure and resilience; and creates a groundbreaking program to reconnect EJ communities divided by highways.

This summer, we have an opportunity to further advance justice by passing the American Jobs Plan, which would direct 40% of the benefits of infrastructure investments to EJ communities. The American Jobs Plan includes crucial programs to elevate communities of color. And it gives us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build an economy that works for everyone.

With that, I'd like to thank our incredible panel of witnesses for being here, and I look forward to our conversation.