



## **Principles to Address the Needs of African Americans and Communities of Color in Climate Change Legislation**

Climate change clearly represents a threat to the environment, but, for millions of people of color in the United States, it is also one more manifestation of how our energy and transportation systems often endanger the health and livelihood of their families, their communities, and their homeland, be it coastal Georgia or rural Kenya. As a result, communities of color in the United States have a unique perspective on how to approach the challenges of climate change.

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (Joint Center) has formed the Commission to Engage African Americans on Climate Change (CEAC) that is composed of diverse and distinguished scientists, lawmakers, academics, faith, non-profit, business, labor and advocacy leaders. It is co-chaired by Ralph B. Everett, Esq., President and CEO of the Joint Center and The Honorable Rodney Ellis, Texas State Senator. The Commission was launched in July 2008 and its mission is to engage the African American community on the issue of climate change, to work with the Joint Center to develop policy recommendations and to help position the African American community to prosper in the new energy economy.

The Commission is seeking to ensure that any program designed to reduce green house gas emissions is created in a manner that is beneficial to communities of color as well as the general population.

Responsible and equitable climate change legislation should achieve the following goals:

- 1. Reduce emissions to avoid dangerous climate change and as a result improve overall air quality and public health;***
- 2. Shift America away from an over reliance on fossil fuels to a clean energy economy;***
- 3. Recognize and minimize any economic impacts resulting from regulating dangerous green house gases; and***
- 4. Ensure that vulnerable communities and ecosystems are not disproportionately impacted by climate change, while fostering international emissions reductions commitments.***

To achieve these goals, the Commission recommends the following:

### **Address the Impacts of Climate Change on Most Impacted and Disadvantaged Communities**

The Environmental Protection Agency's proposed endangerment finding for greenhouse gases, dated April 17, 2009, stated that certain communities face particular risks from climate change:

“Within settlements experiencing climate change stressors, certain parts of the population may be especially vulnerable based on their circumstances. These include the poor, the elderly, the very young, those already in poor health, the disabled, those living alone, those with limited rights and power (such as recent immigrants with limited English skills), and/or indigenous populations dependent on one or a few resources.”

Although the impacts of climate change take many forms, several hit disadvantaged communities particularly hard:

- *Damage to the Gulf Coast region as a result of more severe hurricanes.* As we have learned from the experience with Hurricane Katrina, low-income communities are often the hardest hit and least able to recover from severe storms.
- *Intensification of severe heat waves and potential increases in mortality and morbidity, especially among the elderly, young and frail.* These risks are particularly greater among lower income households that cannot afford air conditioning.
- *Increases in regional ozone pollution due to higher temperatures and changes in meteorological factors.* Increased ozone would heighten the risks of respiratory infection, would aggravate asthma, and could increase cases of premature death.

To address these potentially significant impacts, CEAC makes the following recommendations:

- Congress should direct the EPA to develop guidelines and methodologies for States to identify the most impacted and disadvantaged communities. EPA should consult with States and take into account relevant methodologies and studies. Such guidelines should take into account:
  - geographical areas in which air quality is especially poor and does not meet Federal minimum standards on a regular basis;
  - areas of the country that are reasonably expected to bear the most damaging and most expensive impacts from climate change-related weather disruptions;
  - the proximity of mobile emissions corridors like major highways and stationary sources of greenhouse gasses that also emit co-pollutants; and

- Racial demographics and income distributions.
- States, using the EPA guidelines, should they be required to identify the most impacted disadvantaged communities, would use at least 5% of revenues or allowances reserved for adaptation activities to conduct infrastructure adaptation efforts and to protect public health within these communities.

### **Promote Green Jobs and Economic Opportunity**

One of the biggest challenges we face as we transition to a lower carbon economy is to ensure that we have a trained workforce with the skills to fill the new energy-related jobs that will be created. CEAC believes that education and training are critical if we are to have a workforce that is ready for the transition to a clean energy economy.

Specifically, CEAC makes the following recommendations:

- Fund programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), other minority serving institutions (MSIs), and community colleges that would specialize in the next generation of green technology jobs, including preparation for high skill, high wage, or high demand occupations in the new green economy.
- Fund research and data analysis at HBCUs and MSIs that will allow these institutions to contribute fully to the advances currently being made with regard to issues of climate change, energy, and green technology.
- Ensure that there is financial support for workers pursuing technical and professional training or retraining programs in the energy area. Target a portion of these funds towards economically disadvantaged communities.
- Improve and expand science, technology, engineering, and math offerings for students from grades K-12 to ensure the next generation of workers has the skills to design and maintain our future energy infrastructure. Set up pilot programs in schools within economically disadvantaged communities.
- Fund programs to educate and inform communities of color and other disadvantaged communities, specifically those communities defined within the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, about issues related to climate change.

### **Ensure Protection of Low-Income Households**

Although a well designed climate program need not have an excessively large impact on energy costs in general, low-income consumers will face the greatest burdens from those increases in costs that occur as a result of an effective climate program. Fortunately, analysis by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities has shown that there are policies that can offset higher energy costs for lower- and middle- income households.

The CBPP has found that an amount equal to approximately 15 percent of total allowance value could fund a policy that would fully offset the average loss of purchasing power among the lowest income households (i.e., households in the bottom 20 percent of income levels) and provide partial assistance to moderate-income households in the next 20 percent. CBPP advocates the use of an “Energy Rebate,” with two key mechanisms for distributing funds to these low- and moderate-income households:

- Through the Tax System – low-income working households that pay income taxes would receive a refundable tax credit.
- Through the Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, or Veteran’s Benefits programs – households headed by seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities that might not be required to file tax returns would be covered if they receive benefits through any of these existing programs.

Through the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) system – households that are not required to file a tax return, which include very poor families with children and low-income seniors and people with disabilities, would receive monthly climate refunds through the same system states use to deliver food stamps and other benefits.<sup>1</sup> CEAC recommends that, at a minimum, a climate bill should have provisions to offset higher energy costs of households in the bottom 20% of income levels using the distribution methods outlined by the CBPP.

CEAC also endorses requiring States receiving emissions allowances for energy efficiency to use at least 1 % of the allowances or the proceeds from the sale of allowances to fund community energy efficiency programs for low-income populations within that state.

Finally, the CEAC recognizes that, in addition to the remedies outlined above, other important factors including public transportation and healthcare will affect the ability of communities of color to successfully manage the affects of global warming. The above principles do not constitute the entirety of the CEAC’s thinking on other such related issues.

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<sup>1</sup> *House Committee on Energy and Commerce* (2009) (testimony of Robert Greenstein, Executive Director, Center of Budget and Policy Priorities).