



Perspectives from the front lines: how climate change uniquely impacts environmental justice communities

November 21, 2019

Senator Tammy Duckworth
Opening statement (as prepared)

Good morning and welcome everyone. And a special welcome to our witnesses for joining us today. Celeste, it is good to see you again.

I am thrilled to be chairing today's hearing on an issue that is of critical importance to communities across my home-state of Illinois and this Nation. The issue is environmental justice which is lacking for far too many in this Nation.

Many people remain unaware that low income communities and communities of color experience disproportionate adverse impacts resulting from contaminated air, land and water. But Illinois has a long history of fighting these injustices.

Chicago, Illinois, is the birthplace of Hazel Johnson: the quote-unquote "Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement"... a pioneer of environmental justice activism on the South Side of Chicago.

She founded the People for Community Recovery in 1979 in an effort to get asbestos out of the buildings in her community.

And I am proud that Celeste Flores from Illinois is here today to share how her organization is continuing the work Hazel started.

So, what does environmental injustice look like?

As Cornell University researchers Gary Evans and Elyse Kantrowitz wrote in 2002 quote, "The more researchers scrutinize environmental exposure and health data for racial and income inequalities, the stronger the evidence becomes that grave and widespread environmental injustices have occurred throughout the United States."

Last year the American Journal of Public Health published a study that found a disproportionate burden from particulate matter pollution on African Americans.

And Scientific American reported in 2012 that, wrote quote “the greater the concentration of Hispanics, Asians, African Americans or poor residents in an area, the more likely that potentially dangerous compounds such as vanadium, nitrates and zinc are in the mix of fine particles they breathe.”

Simply put, generations of economic and racial inequality have disproportionately exposed workers, low income communities, communities of color and others to low wages, toxic pollution, and climate threats.

As climate change intensifies, these communities face more powerful storms and floods, more intense heat waves, more deadly wildfires, more extreme droughts, and other devastating effects of the climate crisis on top of the highest levels of toxic pollution found nationwide.

That is why the Special Committee has convened this hearing, and why we hope you will consider this meeting today the first of a long-term relationship of collaboration.

All of us here today are committed to ensuring that justice is the foundation of our Nation’s environmental and economic policies.

We support National climate action that prioritizes helping the hardest hit workers and communities, while addressing legacy pollution.

Thank you again for joining us today, for fighting in behalf of communities who need our assistance, and sharing your expertise.

And with that, I’d like to recognize Senator Carper, who leads the Environmental Justice Caucus with me and Senator Booker, and is our Ranking Member on Environment and Public Works Committee.