

Before the United States House of Representatives
Select Committee on the Climate Crisis

“Making the Case for Climate Action: The Growing Risk and Cost of
Inaction”

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Chairwoman Castor, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the committee, thank you for prioritizing the need for bold action on the climate crisis by hosting this hearing. As this committee is comprised of members under no disillusionment about the existing climate crisis we face, I will cut straight to the chase—for every moment our country delays response to this emergency, we become more and more responsible for the business livelihoods lost and families destroyed because we failed to act when we had both science and fact to back our actions. What’s worse, is that inaction will multiply the climate based impacts to communities of color and marginalized communities fighting simply to experience equal access to the elements necessary for life—breathable clean air, drinkable water and non-toxic land.

There are so many overlaps of social justice inequities and climate such that inaction is inconceivable. I am a wife, a mother of 3, former mayor and former regional administrator of EPA. I am triggered by the fact that I see voting right suppressions enacted that disproportionately impact people of color yet after studies have shown time and time again that black and brown people are most likely to

vote for climate policy¹ and we fail to make that connection. I pray daily for my black American husband and son because I have seen far too many African American men fail to return home due to completely unwarranted violence by those in authority. Yet I know the science and data that show we are and will continue to experience an increase in violence related to warming^{2,3}, particularly in urban areas and heat islands⁴. Yet we have not made the connection. I live in Mississippi, monitor the schools my children attend and do my best to assist teachers with common classroom needs, because I know that extreme heat impacts education and data shows that those who live in heat impacted areas perform worse than those who do not⁵. Climate justice impacts every aspect of life, and none of us can afford inaction.

I must also stress that Mayors and local officials do not have the luxury of inaction. When the fire department is unable to pump water to a fire, homes and businesses burn and people die. When the waste water sewer systems and drinking water systems fail, people die. When the traffic lights cease to work, oxygen tanks stop pumping and heating/cooling systems shut down because the electrical grid is overwhelmed due to a climate crisis, people die. Our responsibilities to protect the very communities in which we live mandate life and death decisions daily and at a moment's notice. Local communities require bold mandatory action climate action as a means of safety and protection and this responsibility should be shared by government, regulators and business industry⁶.

¹ <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/race-and-climate-change/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/opinion/sunday/weather-and-violence.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/upshot/a-rise-in-murder-lets-talk-about-the-weather.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/24/climate/racism-redlining-cities-global-warming.html>

⁵ <https://fse.fsi.stanford.edu/news/how-extreme-heat-affects-learning#:~:text=The%20findings%20show%20that%20the,number%20of%20hot%20school%20days.&text=In%20addition%2C%20minority%20and%20low,of%20heat%2C%20the%20research%20found.>

⁶ <https://www.usmayors.org/programs/mayors-climate-protection-center/>

EDF is currently conducting a research series entitled, [Understanding the Cost of Inaction on Climate Change](#),⁷ and studying the near-term cost of climate inaction.

Each reports crystalizes the fact that not only is climate change devastating local communities and economies, but already overburdened communities are bearing the brunt of the cost. Climate costs are growing rapidly, and will be felt over the next 10-20 years in addition to the next 50. In essence, it means that our inaction isn't just costing our children and grandchildren, it's costing us now.

North Carolina is titled as the state that gave birth to the very movement we now call "Environmental Justice"⁸ and the disparities of economic loss and environmental injustices continue to exist. In our most recent report on the state of North Carolina, we found that over the last decade alone the state experienced four major hurricanes at a cost topping \$1 billion dollars of combined crop and livestock loss after hurricane Florence alone. Black communities were forced to deal with the impacts of overflow from CAFOs (Controlled Animal Feeding Operations) with no recourse—after Florence, overflows in the swine industry “occurred at 50 waste ponds used to collect animal manure, with two cases causing roughly 7 million gallons of waste to spill into local waterways. Meanwhile, poultry farmers struggled with how to deal with the 4.2 million dead chickens and turkeys that drowned as a result of flooded poultry houses in the southeast.”⁹

Without a plan of action, these numbers will continue to climb year after year.

Currently, President Biden has proposed, “The American Jobs Plan” which in North Carolina, calls for \$50 billion in resiliency dollars to help communities protect against these impact with an additional \$16.8 billion to support safe

⁷ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pju1DNz5EPQ-yRkrE03u6F7Y91RHdl0Yg7V_Lmp2FZg/edit

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/interactive/2021/environmental-justice-race/>

⁹ *Climate Change and North Carolina: Near-term Impacts on Society and Recommended Actions*, George Van Houtven, Jared Woollcott and Alison Bean, EDF and RTI International, pg. 35-36

drinking water.¹⁰ It's a start. What we are sure of is that we simply cannot fail to act on what we know is necessary.

There is no questions that extreme weather impacts black and brown communities worse than any other demographic in the nation¹¹. To make matters worse, studies conducted by Rice University and the University of Pittsburg show that predominantly white areas realize an increase in the average wealth post disaster versus minority communities that see a noticeable wealth decrease. This dynamic is caused by the levels of reinvestment into communities post climate disasters.¹²

Researchers further concluded that despite accounting for controlled factors including, but not limited to; age, education, and homeownership, wealth inequality increases in regions hit more by natural disasters¹³. How is it that in a system managed by federal oversight of agencies responsible for the disaster assessment and response, inequities continue to exist? Add the additional climate impacts like vector borne diseases and heat--the EDF North Carolina study found that the most serious temperature-related impacts are likely to be those associated with extreme heat. Emergency room visits due to heat stroke and other hyperthermia conditions will likely increase two to threefold from 2010 to 2050, and in many cases, these costs and impacts will be disproportionately felt by low-income and socially disadvantaged populations who have fewer resources and options for protecting themselves.

Inaction is further compounded with the onset of Coronavirus and the looming threats of future pandemics as a result of climate change. We already know what

¹⁰ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AJP-State-Fact-Sheet-NC.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.greenamerica.org/climate-justice-all/people-color-are-front-lines-climate-crisis>

¹² https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2018-08/ru-ndw082018.php

¹³ <https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/8/15/racial-disparities-and-climate-change>

inaction looks like. We've buried far too many of our mothers, fathers, best friends and yes, children as a result of inaction. Not only are people fighting a pandemic in the midst of a climate emergency, we're having to do it within a system of structural racism and inequity. A study from Yale found that Black Americans are 3.5 times more likely to die of Coronavirus than white Americans.¹⁴ While this should not have been a surprise to any of us, it was certainly acknowledged within minority communities early. These COVID-19 disparities stem from multiple interrelated factors, all driven by longstanding structural racism and inequity. How our government, corporations and communities respond right now will determine whether or not we have learned from our history of systemic racism and exclusion by following the science and listening to community experts in order to create a more efficient and equitable process that saves our economy, ecosystem and lives at the same time.

Inaction on climate change carries a substantial risk to our country's financial system and our ability to continue support of our economy. It cannot be ignored and should be undergirded by a stable federal mandatory climate risk disclosure requirement. While there is the opinion that voluntary climate risk disclosures create a better opportunity for corporations to self-regulate while protecting their proprietary information, the bottom line is that the astronomical rates in the deregulated system represent a failure of market incentives. It also demonstrates that some oversight is necessary to protect those most at risk from the economic fallout of these intense climate related weather events.

When I was Mayor of Greenville, I was blessed with a good corporate partner with respect to disclosure. Mars Foods, Inc. has operated Uncle Ben's Rice, now known as Ben's Original Rice, in Greenville, Mississippi for over 40 years. They not only

¹⁴ <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.05.07.20094250v1.full.pdf>

supply needed jobs to the community but also hold an important role as a major public asset, occupying over 80 acres, 250,000 square feet and producing 100,000 tons of rice annually. It is the largest Mars Food factory in the world.¹⁵ It sits right on the Mississippi River and serves as an anchor to a majority African-American community that has worked hard to overcome systemic poverty for generations. During my time of public service, I had to manage not one, but two ¹⁶500 year flood events¹⁷. Both events caused extensive and expensive damage to the infrastructure of the community. Roads, bridges, water system were all impacted by the heavy rainfall and incessant storms that battered the city year after year. Quite frankly, the tax base of the city couldn't handle the existing infrastructure needs, let alone the added pressure of becoming resilient to climate impacts. It's the type of activity that would cause a major business to close up shop, and move someplace else. Nevertheless, the Mars Food climate sustainability plan took into account the asset placement, needs, preparation and mitigation necessary to continue strong global economic growth while supporting local community needs. Their willingness to not only assess climate risk but share the information meant that I was prepared to account for the necessary support: street upgrades, police and fire in case of emergency, water system points of weakness, potential levee breaches and places to point the Army Corp of Engineers for review. All of these calculated cost added value to the company while protecting the invisible investor: the citizens of my city that through tax dollars, were able to defer repairs to other places it was needed. Not only does Mars Food have a multipage climate action

¹⁵ <https://www.usarice.com/news-and-events/publications/usa-rice-daily/article/usa-rice-daily/2018/09/28/mars-food-celebrates-40-years-in-greenville-mississippi><https://www.usarice.com/news-and-events/publications/usa-rice-daily/article/usa-rice-daily/2018/09/28/mars-food-celebrates-40-years-in-greenville-mississippi>

¹⁶ <https://deltabusinessjournal.com/flooding-on-the-mississippi-river-becoming-more-common-and-severe/>

¹⁷ <http://extension.msstate.edu/news/extension-outdoors/2017/understand-historic-record-breaking-floods> -

*Noted that this is based upon 2017 numbers. More recent floods have caused an increase from the recorded floods of this article.

statement¹⁸, they continue to share information and support the local community through advanced risk assessment for climate. In 2020 they invested \$2.5 Million dollars into Greenville and continue to coordinate closely with local government solidifying even further their commitment to stability for their investors, the market and the community.

How I wish that same energy could have emerged in Texas with the recent winter storms and energy debacle that arose from the complete failure of publically traded energy corporations to prepare, let alone disclose their climate risk.

Due to longstanding environmental and social disparities, minority communities also have higher rates of chronic conditions that put us at risk for more severe illness. As an example, we know that black and brown people as well as lower income people tend to have higher average exposure to air pollution. We also know that air pollution exposure causes many of the same chronic diseases that make COVID more deadly, including heart disease, diabetes, and asthma. Inequity in healthcare access and quality of care may then further contribute to worse outcomes, including higher mortality. Add to this the fact there is ample evidence that racism in healthcare settings often results in people of color receiving a lower standard of care, and that black folks just plain don't trust these systems and may delay or avoid seeking care for COVID symptoms because of past negative experiences or distrust stemming from the legacy of racist and unethical medical research and experimentation on people of color. **Just today, the announcement of concerns around the Johnson & Johnson vaccine are creating additional mistrust for a vaccine already fragilely accepted in minority communities. Failure to provide other methods of climate protection—reducing carbon emissions,**

¹⁸ <https://www.mars.com/about/policies-and-practices/climate-action>

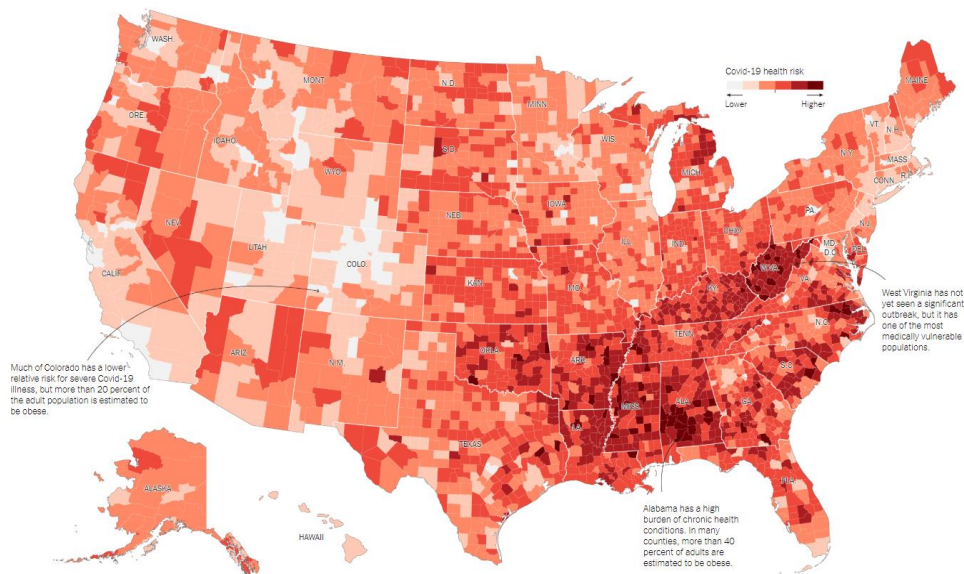
supporting grid stability, etc., will further exasperate climate impacts to communities of color.

Finally, lower healthcare access and quality may also worsen chronic health conditions, and influence access to COVID testing and diagnosis, which in turn impacts infection rates if people are more likely to be living and working with undiagnosed illness.

While we don't yet know exactly how extreme heat compounds the effects of COVID-19 on low income communities and people of color, we can see that a relationship exist and it is exasperated by oppressive systems of racial inequity. Dr. Linda Ray Murray of Chicago, IL outlined a stunningly familiar relationship between the death rate of COVID and the Chicago Heat Wave of 1995, the deadliest in the city's history.¹⁹ Over 700 people died in Chicago's housing projects in what can be explained as death by virtue of being poor. Moms Clean Air Force Organizer Columba Sainz, wife and mother of 3 in Phoenix, Arizona, explained it best. "Energy poverty is real; people in the lowest income groups spend the most on energy. The hotter it gets, the more it cost and the more we need. Who can afford to pay over half of their paycheck on air conditioning in the middle of a pandemic and a heat wave? Communities of color are energy poor and 25 years later, we see the exact same dynamics played out on the exact same people in the exact same way: we have not legislated to lessen the impacts of structural racism but instead, have placed a higher burden and lower value on the lives of black and brown people through racist policies like the 100 rollbacks of EPA. Systems that are meant to protect the health of the most vulnerable among us are being cast aside for profit and Coronavirus has revealed just how deadly inaction can be.

¹⁹ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/6/28/21302962/25th-anniversary-heat-wave-racism-covid-19-chicago-linda-murray>

The New York Times published a map (Figure 1)²⁰ which displays the proportion of adults in each county who have one or more of the conditions known to worsen COVID illness: diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, heart disease, and chronic lung disease; southern states have a larger proportion of their populations who have these underlying conditions. With extreme heat projected in many of these



states over the summer, we expect these conditions may worsen, especially with increases in ozone concentrations that are seen in the warmer months.

We also know that there are clear disparities by race and income in the prevalence of chronic diseases that put people at higher risk of severe COVID illness. 69% of American Indian seniors and 61% of black seniors have chronic diseases putting them at elevated risk of severe COVID illness, versus 54% of white seniors. 40% of low income people under 65 are at higher risk, versus 24% of those with higher income. COVID-19 death rates in the U.S. also vary dramatically by race. Based on mortality data through June 24, 2020, the mortality rate for black Americans (65.8 deaths per 100,000 people, or 1 in 1,500) is more than twice as high as the

²⁰Figure 1: NY Times, May 18, 2020

rate for whites. Black Americans represent 12.4% of the population in the US, but have suffered 23.8% of deaths as of June 24.

With economic resources stretched thin by COVID-19, thoughtful spending and prioritizing projects that produce the most immediate benefit are needed – this includes having better information regarding mapping of heat islands and a better understanding of the risks associated with low income and minority communities. To better understand the disproportionate impacts of extreme weather on communities of color, we need to deploy many existing tools – and develop some new ones – with the specific goal of understanding the complex web of interactions that result in heightened weather-related risk to such communities. We absolutely must demand a halt to EPA reversing lifesaving protections and that they revisit their mission of protecting human health and the environment. This is our call to action at Moms, demanding “Justice in Every Breathe” of every policy impacting the health and well-being of children.

An inter-disciplinary approach is needed, one that begins with better understanding the localized impacts of climate change-fueled heatwaves and other extreme weather events. Research is needed to quantify how much more communities of color may be impacted during an extreme event and the historical reasons for such disproportionate impacts. For example, are communities of color living in a more vulnerable area such as an urban heat island lacking green space? Are residents living in low-lying neighborhoods without sufficient flood control? These data must be incorporated into a larger framework that can evaluate community-level risks with the knowledge of pollution exposure, housing stock, health characteristics, age distribution, indoor air quality, and other household risks such as overcrowding and the prevalence of lead in water and paint.

More information is needed about the public health risks of expanding petrochemical operations in areas susceptible to climate change-induced storms, flooding, and sea level rise. Studies in the area of St. James Parish in Louisiana, part of Cancer Alley have already shown a correlation between the rampant air pollution in the area and Coronavirus deaths.²¹ Recently EDF and Moms Clean Air Force signed a letter in support of Rise St. James, calling on bank to cease financing of the Formosa project in St. James Parish. Not only is the project dangerous and unnecessary, it continues to perpetuate inaction on calls for environmental justice, particularly for communities on the frontlines of pollution every day. It's case study of why we must collect this information now to protect people in the future. Local governments need resources to support sustainability planning efforts such as development of climate action and mitigation plans and renewable energy portfolios. Supporting NGO organizations and allies need to know where and how to help best. A comprehensive understanding of current conditions will also help project future extreme weather-related risks to communities of color as the climate continues to warm.

We often quote the saying, "We're all in the boat together so let's make sure we're rowing in the same direction". I disagree. We're in the same storm, but we're not all in the same boat. Some of us are in rowboats, while others are in yachts. Some are sitting on an aircraft carrier while others are just bobbing along on a floatie. Whatever our mode of traversing this storm, none of us can afford inaction and the failure to acknowledge this fact in and of itself is an action. It's a choice to ignore the others in the storm. Justice and equity require a new focus on urgent action with an eye towards funding the scientific research and ground infrastructure

²¹ <https://earth.gizmodo.com/im-scared-study-links-cancer-alley-air-pollution-to-hi-1843484042>

necessary to respond in a manner that demonstrates a societal commitment to righting that imbalance.

I have attached additional documents for review of this committee and as part of my written testimony. They include the following:

- A. USGCRP. (2018) Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume II [Reidmiller, D.R., C.W. Avery, D.R. Easterling, K.E. Kunkel, K.L.M. Lewis, T.K. Maycock, and B.C. Stewart (eds.)]. U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, USA, 1515 pp. doi: https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/downloads/NCA4_2018_FullReport.pdf.

This report, developed by an interagency working group and published by the US government, documents how the impacts from human-caused climate change are intensifying and threatening our physical, social and economic well-being. In particular, it highlights that impacts will not be distributed equally and vulnerable communities that have lower capacity to cope with extreme climate-related events are expected to experience greater impacts.

- B. Hsiang, S., Kopp, R., Jina, A., Rising, J., et al. (2017) Estimating economic damage from climate change in the United States. *Science* 356(6345), 1362-1369. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aal4369>

This study integrated data with climate models to examine how six sectors – agriculture, crime, coastal storms, energy, human mortality, and labor – would respond to climate change, estimating future costs through the end of the century. The authors project that a large transfer of value northward and westward will take place, increasing economic inequality. The poorest third of counties would be hardest hit and are projected to experience damages between 2 and 20% of county income (90% chance) under a business-as-usual emissions scenario (RCP 8.5).

- C. Raval, A., Chen, T., & Shah, P. (2019) Mapping Resilience: A Blueprint for Thriving in the Face of Climate Disasters. Asian Pacific Environmental Network. https://apen4ej.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/APEN-Mapping_Resilience-Report.pdf

This report aims to raise the public visibility of the needs of frontline communities for climate adaptation and resilience efforts. Though focused largely on California, it highlights lessons learned across the US in terms of communities disproportionately

impacted by climate change-related disasters, and ways to understand and build resilience for such groups

D. Union of Concerned Scientists. (2018) Underwater: Rising Seas, Chronic Floods, and the Implications for US Coastal Real Estate.

<https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2018/06/underwater-analysis-full-report.pdf>

This analysis identified residential and commercial properties at risk of chronic inundation as sea levels rise. They found that within the next 15 years, roughly 147,000 existing homes and 7,000 commercial properties – currently worth \$63 billion – are at risk of being inundated an average of 26 times per year or more.

E. First Street Foundation. (2020) The First National Flood Risk Assessment: Defining America's Growing Risk.

https://assets.firststreet.org/uploads/2020/06/first_street_foundation_first_national_flood_risk_assessment.pdf

First Street Foundation created an online database and visualization tool that shows past, present, and future flood risk due to climate change. They identified around 1.7 times the number of properties as having substantial risk compared to the FEMA 1-in-100 SFHA designation. This means that of the 14.6 million properties across the country identifies as being as at substantial risk, 5.9 million properties and property owners are currently unaware of or underestimating the risk they face. Vulnerable communities with less resources to insure themselves will face greater risk from flooding events.

I stand available to answer any questions of the Committee.