

June 8, 2010

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
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Dear Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Senator Reid,

We are environmental justice advocates, scientists and other academics who have come together in an effort to find common ground on, and address, issues of critical importance to our environment. Although we come from very different communities, one important issue upon which we agree is that the public health aspects of climate change have been insufficiently emphasized in the discussions and policies connected to this global threat. We write this letter to highlight two policy recommendations that could improve the public health of our nation and would be applicable to any climate and energy legislation. Because of our overriding concern with public health impacts, which disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color, we believe that: 1) the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) authority to regulate greenhouse gases (GHGs) should not be overturned or diminished; and 2) climate change policy should address the emissions of greenhouse gas co-pollutants, as well as the emissions of greenhouse gases themselves. Below, we elaborate briefly on these policy recommendations.

On April 2, 2007 the U.S. Supreme Court (*Mass. v. EPA*, 549 U.S. 497, 2007) ruled that the EPA had the authority and obligation to regulate GHGs under the terms of the Clean Air Act of 1970 if the agency found that these emissions posed a danger to the public health and welfare of our nation. Then, on December 7, 2009, the EPA declared ("the Endangerment finding") that GHGs threaten the public health and welfare of current and future generations.

The EPA based this ruling on findings that climate change has direct and indirect consequences for human health. Heat waves affect health directly and, especially with warmer nights, are projected to take an increasing toll in developed and developing nations (1,2). Climate constrains the range of infectious disease vectors and agents, while weather extremes and changing weather patterns affect the timing, intensity and location of outbreaks (3). With warmer winters, for example, tick-borne Lyme disease is increasing dramatically in the U.S. Northeast (4), and the heavier rainfalls occurring often overwhelm sewage systems and precipitate water-borne disease outbreaks (5). Rising carbon dioxide concentrations, by boosting plant pollen production, compounds the respiratory and cardiac effects of particulates and ozone from fossil fuel combustion, while

spring and fall allergy seasons have lengthened with climate change (6). And the flourishing of forest pests leaves dead stands vulnerable to fires that release stored carbon and worsen air quality.

The “Endangerment” finding enabled the EPA to exercise its legal power to regulate emissions of greenhouse gases and thus help stabilize the climate and reduce the ongoing detrimental health effects of climate change. However, there are efforts by several members of Congress, including Senator Murkowski of Alaska, to legislatively strip the EPA of this authority. Moreover, several of the climate and energy bills being considered in the U.S. Congress also remove from the EPA some or all of this authority.

Emissions of greenhouse gases are driving a global threat that could have potentially devastating health consequences for the population of our nation and the rest of the world. For that reason we believe EPA should retain its current authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

The fight against global warming presents us with another significant opportunity to improve the current state of public health in our nation: we can use climate and energy policy to help reduce emissions of other air pollutants in addition to greenhouse gases, such as particulate matter and its precursors. Particulate matter air pollution results in the premature death and illness of tens of thousands of U.S. residents annually, especially in urban areas where concentrations tend to be highest. Exposure to particulate matter is linked with all causes of premature mortality, cardiovascular and cardiopulmonary mortality, and respiratory illnesses, hospitalizations, reduced lung function and school absences. Fine and large particles, nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide emitted by U.S. power plants alone, which are typically coal-fired, kill as many as 24,000 people each year in the U.S., including 2,800 from lung cancer. These power plant emissions are also responsible for 38,200 non-fatal heart attacks and tens of thousands of emergency room visits, hospitalizations and lost work days (7-14). Emissions from transport fuels add to the burden. By using climate change policy in combination with existing reduction strategies we will be able to drive down concentrations of these deadly particulates to levels we have not yet been able to achieve. Greenhouse gases and other air pollutants are often emitted by the same sources; thus attempting to reduce emissions of both simultaneously is a logical step.

Furthermore, recent scientific calculations (15) indicate that particulates from combustion of diesel, biomass and coal are themselves heat-trapping and, when they settle in ice and snow, accelerate their melting and the heat absorbing properties of the earth. This may be playing a significant role in warming of the Arctic and melting of Andean and Himalayan glaciers. It thus makes sense that climate change and energy policy be constructed so that it yields maximum reductions of greenhouse gas emissions and emissions of other more traditional air pollutants, including particulate matter.

While some of the signers of this letter take issue with other aspects of passed and proposed national climate change legislation, addressing the issues of EPA authority and emissions of co-pollutants would significantly improve the proposed climate and energy legislation and further its implementation in the coming years. It would also save lives.

Sincerely yours,

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