

# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE A GROWING MOVEMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

The African American Environmentalist Association and the New York Affordable Reliable Electricity Alliance have developed the following issue brief on Environmental Justice as part of our organizations' ongoing educational efforts. As a relatively new policy issue which did not receive federal attention until the early 1990s, Environmental Justice has steadily gained public and media interest, especially in regard to the growing concern about climate change and environmental and energy policies.

This issue brief provides an overview of the Environmental Justice concept and movement. It will also discuss the role of energy in Environmental Justice challenges both in general and specific to New York State.

## WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

Environmental Justice as a public movement developed within the past two decades to address the disproportionate impacts of pollution and environmental problems on poor and minority communities in the United States and abroad.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has defined Environmental Justice as:

*"The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including a racial, ethnic, or a socioeconomic group, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.*

*Environmental justice communities are minority and/or low income communities that often are excluded from the environmental policy setting and/or decision-making process and are subject to a disproportionate impact from one or more environmental hazards. These communities experience a disparate implementation of environmental regulations, requirements, practices, and activities."<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. EPA: [http://www.epa.gov/oswer/ej/pdf/2006\\_0428\\_final-2005-ej-success-stories\\_508.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/oswer/ej/pdf/2006_0428_final-2005-ej-success-stories_508.pdf)

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The modern concept and terminology of Environmental Justice are widely attributed to a Warren County, North Carolina case, recognized as the beginning of the Environmental Justice movement.

In 1982 a toxic dump was built in a predominantly non-white, economically depressed town in rural North Carolina. According to the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, "The Warren County PCB landfill was constructed in 1982 to contain soil that was contaminated by the illegal spraying of oil containing PCBs from over 210 miles of highway shoulders. Over 30,000 gallons of contaminated oil were illegally sprayed along roadsides in 14 North Carolina counties."<sup>2</sup>

The case resulted in a 1983 study<sup>3</sup> by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) which found that in EPA Region IV<sup>4</sup> a majority of hazardous waste sites were located in or in close proximity to low-income and minority communities. The controversial research did not, however, study the effects of these sites on the local citizens.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past two decades, Environmental Justice issues have increasingly entered the public debate, and in 1992 the EPA created the office of Environmental Justice to address these challenges at the federal level by integrating Environmental Justice into all EPA programs, policies, and activities.

## ENERGY & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Electricity is essential to our lives and daily activities, powering hospitals, schools, homes, mass transit systems, etc. Yet electricity generation poses major environmental challenges, including several issues specific to Environmental Justice.

Fossil fuel burning power plants are the largest single industrial source of air pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, carbon dioxide and mercury.<sup>6</sup> Exposure to these pollutants has been linked to heart disease, lung cancer, respiratory illnesses, and premature death.

Of particular concern is asthma, which constitutes a major health problem in the United States and throughout the world today. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. national asthma rate has doubled in the last 20 years, with six percent of all Americans having asthma. Asthma is a chronic allergy ailment marked

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<sup>2</sup> North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources: [http://wastenot.enr.state.nc.us/WarrenCo\\_Fact\\_Sheet.htm](http://wastenot.enr.state.nc.us/WarrenCo_Fact_Sheet.htm)

<sup>3</sup> "Siting of Hazardous Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities." June 01, 1983. U.S. GAO. <http://archive.gao.gov/d48t13/121648.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> EPA Region IV includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

<sup>5</sup> North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources: [http://wastenot.enr.state.nc.us/WarrenCo\\_Fact\\_Sheet.htm](http://wastenot.enr.state.nc.us/WarrenCo_Fact_Sheet.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Natural Resources Defense Council: <http://www.nrdc.org/air/pollution/qbushplan.asp>

by wheezing, shortness of breath, coughing and tightness of the chest; the disease accounts for almost \$13 billion in annual health care costs.<sup>7</sup> Research has shown that toxins from power plant emissions can not only trigger asthma attacks in adults and children, but may also contribute to the early development of asthma in healthy children.<sup>8</sup>

In 2002, Abt Associates, a private research firm that often conducts studies for the EPA issued a report which estimated that pollution from more than 80 power plants throughout the United States will be the cause of almost 6,000 premature deaths, 140,000 asthma attacks and 14,000 cases of acute bronchitis in 2007.<sup>9</sup>

In New York State the problem of respiratory illnesses is particularly acute. An earlier 2000 Abt Associates study estimated that in New York State in 2007 (with improvements in air quality taken into account from 2000), airborne particulate matter would be the cause of 1,200 premature deaths, 744 cases of chronic bronchitis, 481 hospital admissions, 273 asthma related emergency room visits, 2,180 cases of acute bronchitis, 23,300 asthma attacks, and more than 200,000 work loss days.<sup>10</sup>

Since the greatest impacts of power plant emissions are felt within a 30 mile radius of the facility, residents of densely populated urban areas where power plants are located are affected more than those who live outside that area. In the past, an inordinate number of power plants have been built in low-income, minority communities which subsequently suffer from the worst effects of plant operations and emissions.

In addition to other programs and initiatives aimed at promoting conservation and efficiency and cutting automobile emissions, reducing the use of fossil fuels for electricity generation is crucial to improving the air quality in New York State. Through statewide investment in new technologies and environmentally friendly sources of energy such as wind, nuclear and solar, the adverse health impacts associated with fossil fuel power plant emissions could be reduced throughout minority and low-income communities.

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<sup>7</sup> "Speaker Miller and Members Announce Asthma Task Force," May 6, 2003, The Council of the City of New York, [http://www.nycouncil.info/pdf\\_files/newswire/asthma.pdf](http://www.nycouncil.info/pdf_files/newswire/asthma.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> California Environmental Protection Agency, 2004: <http://www.arb.ca.gov/newsrel/nr062404.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Seelye, Katharine Q. "Study Sees 6,000 Deaths from Power Plants," April 18, 2002, The New York Times

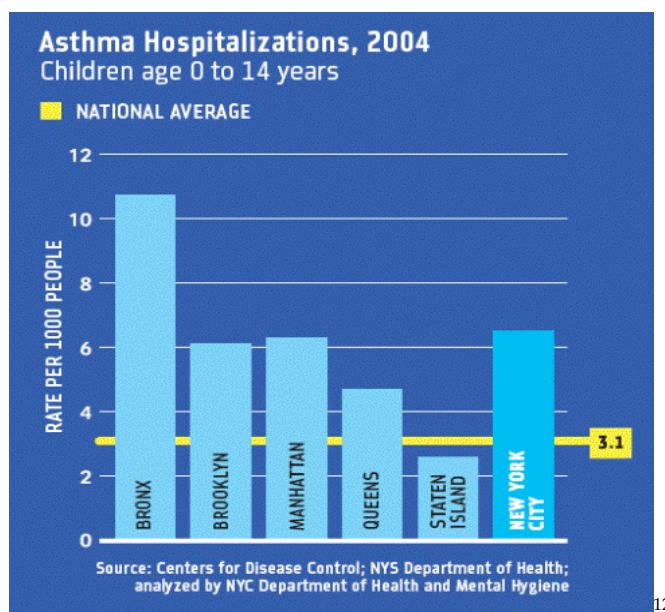
<sup>10</sup> "The Particulate-Related Health Benefits of Reducing Power Plant Emissions." October, 2000. Abt Associates and the Clean Air Task Force. [http://www.catf.us/publications/reports/Abt\\_PM\\_Report.pdf](http://www.catf.us/publications/reports/Abt_PM_Report.pdf)

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN NEW YORK CITY

Like any major metropolitan area, New York City requires massive amounts of electricity, and as the city continues to grow, these needs will increase.

One of the major Environmental Justice issues in New York City is the connection between asthma and power plant emissions and automobile exhaust. In New York, the Council of the City of New York reported in May 2003 that “a recent study found that one in every four children in the South Bronx and Central Harlem was afflicted with asthma, one of the highest rates in the country.”

Founded in 2003, the New York City Asthma Task Force is charged with bringing together experts in the health care field to analyze New York City’s growing asthma epidemic and develop recommendations for local, state and federal officials in an attempt to combat the disease. In May 2006, Council Member José Serrano spoke on behalf of the Asthma Task Force, stating that “Children in the South Bronx are five times more likely to be hospitalized because of respiratory ailments.” Council Member Serrano, whose district includes “asthma alley” – local jargon for the Hunts Point section of the Bronx – added, “Fragile communities are at a greater risk because of pollution caused by power plants and other large, environmental expansion. These emissions exacerbate asthma in our children.”<sup>11</sup>



As part of his PlaNYC 2030 initiative to lower New York City’s carbon emissions and improve air quality, on June 8, 2007 Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Manhattan Borough

<sup>11</sup> “Speaker Miller and Members Announce Asthma Task Force,” May 6, 2003, The Council of the City of New York, [http://www.nycouncil.info/pdf\\_files/newswire/asthma.pdf](http://www.nycouncil.info/pdf_files/newswire/asthma.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> The New York Academy of Sciences: <http://www.nyas.org/ebriefreps/main.asp?intEBriefID=646>

President Scott Singer announced the creation of an asthma treatment facility in East Harlem, where asthma rates are the highest in the city.

Earlier in April 2007, when announcing PlaNYC 2030, Mayor Bloomberg referred to New York City's air quality and asthma problems:

*"...But in that clearer air hangs this ominous cloud: New Yorkers still breathe more of the soot that contributes so heavily to deadly heart and lung disease than do people in all but one other major American city. And because of exposure to sooty diesel exhaust and smoke-belching power plants that are concentrated in low-income communities, many of their residents breathe (the) brunt of this public health menace. In parts of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem, children are hospitalized for asthma at nearly four times the national average. Four times! We cannot turn a blind eye to this outrage. All our children deserve a healthy start in life. Many people call that environmental justice; I simply call it the right thing to do."*<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While the Environmental Justice movement has grown and expanded nationally over the past twenty years, independent and governmental reports have shown that much more must be done to incorporate the movement's philosophy into common practice. Environmental Justice must be included in the discussion of legislation and as part of environmentally sound decision making concerning economic development and energy policies.

As climate change and environmental challenges increasingly shape public dialogue and legislation, the role of energy and electricity generation in Environmental Justice challenges cannot be overlooked. Ensuring that all citizens have a reliable supply of clean and affordable energy would represent a major step forward for the Environmental Justice movement in mitigating the effects of fossil fuel based power plants on low-income and minority communities.

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<sup>13</sup> "Mayor Bloomberg Delivers PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York." April 22, 2007.

[http://www.mikebloomberg.com/en/issues/environment\\_sustainability/mayor\\_michael\\_bloomberg\\_delivers\\_planyc\\_a\\_greener\\_greater\\_new\\_york](http://www.mikebloomberg.com/en/issues/environment_sustainability/mayor_michael_bloomberg_delivers_planyc_a_greener_greater_new_york)



**PRINCIPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**  
**AFRICAN AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTALIST ASSOCIATION, 2007**

A 21st Century environmental justice model is needed to achieve equality in environmental protection. These Ten Principles of Environmental Justice were developed to facilitate a discussion about the need to accelerate activities and programs to protect vulnerable communities. The principles are also a guidance tool for evaluating and implementing practical solutions to environmental justice problems.

- 1) **Environmental Justice** seeks to provide environmental protection to our most vulnerable communities.
- 2) **Environmental Justice** demands that public policy will protect society's most vulnerable communities.
- 3) **Environmental Justice** should provide equal economic opportunities to all sectors of our society while providing equal environmental protection.
- 4) **Environmental Justice** calls for sustainable development, efficient use of resources and the availability of abundant energy supplies at reasonable prices.
- 5) **Environmental Justice** requests respect in policy decision-making in order to distribute production facilities that emit contaminants equitably among geographical locations.
- 6) **Environmental Justice** demands that toxic wastes should not be targeted for and concentrated in minority communities.
- 7) **Environmental Justice** should expand the definition of 'environment' and seek to redress unique inner city environmental problems.
- 8) **Environmental Justice** affirms a commitment to equal environmental protection for all people.
- 9) **Environmental Justice** should provide compensation to individuals and communities that have suffered disproportionate exposure to pollution.
- 10) **Environmental Justice** and The Declaration of Independence, hold "that all Men are created equal, that they were endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Environmental protection is an inalienable right.

## **Norris McDonald**



Founder and president of the African American Environmentalist Association, Norris McDonald has been a career environmentalist for 26 years. Formerly with the Environmental Policy Center (now Friends of the Earth), as Director of the Energy Conservation and Transportation Project, he is an energy and environmental specialist and has served as an advisor to industry and local neighborhood community groups. McDonald was president of the Washington, D.C. Chapter of the American Association of Blacks in Energy (AABE) from 1982 to 1984. He organized the first Energy Braintrust for the late Congressman Mickey Leland, and was a participant in the original meetings with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to adopt environmental justice policies.

McDonald led the fight in Congress in the early 1980s to maintain Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFÉ) Standards. He presented testimony before the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee at the confirmation hearing of John Herrington as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy in 1985. McDonald drafted and led the lobbying campaign in the U.S. Congress to pass the Federal Shared Energy Savings Act, signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1986, and assisted in the passage of the first civil rights legislation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the No Fear Act, signed by President Bush on May 15, 2002.

McDonald was the author of the first comprehensive studies of pollution in Washington, D.C., is a recognized national speaker on energy and the environment, and has received special recognition from the U.S. Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Interior for his work in energy and environmental issues.

## **Laurent L. Lawrence**



Laurent L. Lawrence began his career with the New York Affordable Reliable Electricity Alliance (New York AREA) in January of 2005. An alumnus of Utica College of Syracuse University, Mr. Lawrence earned a dual degree in Public Relations and Journalism. Along with the various scholastic leadership positions that he held while in college, Mr. Lawrence has studied and interned in London, England as well as written for various newsletters, newspapers, and magazines.

Stationed in the heart of New York City, Mr. Lawrence is Executive Director for New York AREA and manages the daily operations of the organization. In his capacity, Mr. Lawrence assists with communications, member development, policy-maker outreach, public relations and advertising.