

Testimony of Mustafa Santiago Ali
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Before the House Oversight Committee's Subcommittee on Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
Hearing on Examining the Oil Industry's Efforts to Suppress the Truth about Climate
Change

Wednesday, October 23, 2019

Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Roy and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the National Wildlife Federation, our 52 state and territorial affiliates, more than 6 million members, and environmental justice communities across our country, thank you for the honor of testifying before you today.

Today's hearing comes at a crucial time as our most vulnerable communities are in the crosshairs of both public health impacts from the burning of fossil fuels and the impacts of climate change.

My Grandmother had a saying, "When You Know Better, Do Better." Exxon and other Fossil Fuel Companies have known the impacts of their industry on our planet and the health of our most vulnerable communities for decades.

For over 40 years the Environmental Justice movement has been placing a spotlight on the disproportionate health impacts that have been happening in communities of color, lower-income communities and on Indigenous lands. They have been collecting, researching and analyzing their own data (through citizen science) and working with colleges, universities, and scientific organizations to highlight those public health challenges and climate impacts they face on a daily basis. Health impacts of burning fossil fuel include increased respiratory issues, exacerbated allergy symptoms, asthma, cardiovascular disease and premature death. In the United States more than 26 million people have asthma.

Communities have also had to battle the misinformation campaigns over the years. A handful of fossil fuel companies have provided funding to scientists to produce biased data. This analysis is used to deny or understate the negative impacts of the fossil fuel industry, discredit the practicality and value of clean and renewable energy systems, or refute the very existence of climate change and the role of human activity in its proliferation.

Environmental Justice communities often have to deal with the double whammy of fossil fuel pollution that comes from facilities like those owned and operated by Exxon and others. They have to deal with the immediate impacts of exposures to the burning of fossil fuels and to the warming of the oceans and our planet, which contributes to the increases in Hurricanes, Floods, Droughts and Wildfires just to name a few.

FOSSIL FUEL FACILITIES:

- Fossil fuel facilities are disproportionately located in communities of color:
- From Southwest Detroit to Baytown Texas to Cancer Alley in Louisiana communities of color are in the crosshairs of the pollution burned by fossil fuel facilities, and have been told not to worry.
- More than 100,000 people are dying prematurely from air pollution in our country (that's more than dying from gun violence).
- More than 1 million African Americans live within a half-mile of oil and natural gas wells, processing, transmission and storage facilities (not including oil refineries)
- 6.7 million live in counties with refineries, potentially exposing them to an elevated risk of cancer due to toxic air emissions
- In Tennessee alone, 54% of residents living in counties with oil refineries were African America. For reference, African Americans make up around 13% of the US population.
- Emissions from oil and gas have been linked to over 138,000 asthma attacks and over 100,000 missed school days each year.
- Approximately 13.4 percent of African-American children nationwide have asthma, compared to 7.3 percent for white children
- African-Americans are exposed to 38 percent more polluted air than Caucasian Americans, and they are 75 percent more likely to live in fence-line communities than the average American – Yes, your zip code does determines your health and what's next door plays a big role in how long you might live.

Climate change presents the second whammy, it is a global and domestic problem and our most vulnerable communities are often hit first and worst. Disruptions of physical, biological, and ecological systems can lead to significant impacts to wealth and health. It's really quite simple communities of color carry the burden for the burning of fossil fuels. In 2017, there were 16 natural disasters in the United States that exceeded \$1 billion in losses each, a new record.

- **HURRICANES:** Hurricane Harvey dropped 27 trillion gallons of rain over Texas and Louisiana in 2017, with an estimated total cost of \$125 billion, making it the second most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history. Over 72,000 people needed to be rescued, causing 14,000 National Guard members to be activated to help. Communities members in the Manchester neighborhood in Houston and Port Arthur, TX were severely damaged by both the water, wind and the 8.3 million pounds of unauthorized air pollution released in their communities, putting their health at risk. Hurricane trauma creates high levels of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder among those impacted by these storms. Natural disasters increase stressors further threatening the mental health conditions already facing overburdened, vulnerable communities.
- **FLOODS & EXTREME RAIN:** Heavy precipitation events—i.e., the heaviest one percent of rainfalls—now drop 38 percent more rain in the Northeast, 42 percent in the Midwest, and 18 percent more in the Southeast, compared to 50 years ago. Communities like Princeville, North Carolina The first U.S. town built by freed slaves has had to deal with two 500 year floods and hundreds of other communities of color and lower-income communities across the country are facing similar challenges. Communities along the little Pee Dee river in South Carolina are still trying to recover from the historic flooding

and many of them can not afford to elevate their homes and as a result cannot get insurance and may lose them.

- **DROUGHTS:** Phoenix AZ, Los Angeles CA, Miami FL, Lincoln, Nebraska and many other communities are running out of clean drinking water exacerbated by increasing temperatures and decreasing rain fall. Farmers across the south are dealing with Extreme 'Flash Droughts' and it has a disproportionate effect on African American farmers who are holding on by a ever increasingly thin thread.
- **WILDFIRES:** Climate change is drying Western states, lengthening the average wildfire season by 78 days and triggering tree stress that increases the susceptibility of forests to wildfire. The wildfires are also impacting farmworkers in the fields as well as, tens of thousands of homeless in Southern California who were struggling to escape the smoke as wildfires made their way through the region. Experts cautioned against spending time outdoors when it's smoky, but for many, staying inside wasn't an option.
- **DISPLACEMENT:** Communities Of Color across our country are being pushed out of their ancestral lands and becoming climate refugees.
- The Gullah Geechee people who are decendants of both escaped and freed slaves off the South Carolina and Georgia coast are dealing with sea level rise.
- Isle de Jean Charles is a small strip of land in Louisiana's coastal south that has been home to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians since the tribe found refuge there in the early 19th century is disappearing into the sea.
- The disastrous effects of climate change are impacting Alaska harder than any other U.S. state. The Arctic is heating up more than twice as fast as the rest of the planet

In conclusion, Exxon and other fossil fuel companies knew of the need to reduce our fossil fuel emissions and now it is up to us, you as the members of Congress and the Fossil fuel industry to do better. Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering your questions.

CITATIONS:

- <https://www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/Environmental-Threats/Climate-Change-Natural-Disasters-fact-sheet.ashx>
- <https://nwf.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=9d24acf0f70d49999fea768ea9b86dcd>
- <https://live-naacp-site.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Fossil-Fueled-Foolery-An-Illustrated-Primer-on-the-Top-10-Manipulation-Tactics-of-the-Fossil-Fuel-Industry-FINAL-1.pdf>
- <https://www.naacp.org/climate-justice-resources/fumes-across-fence-line/>

