



PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



Ensuring a Healthy World for Healthy People

A Environment and Health Platform

Everyone needs clean air to breathe. For children to develop normally and grow up healthy, they need an environment free of toxic contaminants. People from all walks of life deserve to live, work, and play in healthy communities. The well-being of future generations demands that we act to arrest accelerating global climate change caused by human activities. As physicians, nurses and health professionals with an abiding commitment to protecting public health, we call on our elected officials to adopt and implement policies that protect everyone from the serious environmental and public health threats that face us, both here and abroad.

Many of the greatest environmental and public health challenges we face are fundamentally connected to the political and economic strategies we adopt to produce and consume energy, build and maintain our communities, and manage toxic chemicals that may pollute our air, water, and food. The United States leads the world in energy production, has set the global standard for efforts to clean up the air, and has developed the most innovative and health-protective technologies in the world, and is home to some of the best of scientific thought. However, the nation has stepped backward in protecting our environment and public health. Our government is now considering a rollback of our landmark Clean Air Act, though many communities still struggle with dirty air. We lead the world in greenhouse gas emissions, yet our government is disregarding scientific consensus on the potential for catastrophic global climate change. As a nation, we must renew our commitment to improve the air, curb our contributions to global warming, reduce pollution, and know the relationship between environmental degradation and health concerns such as asthma.

We Call on Elected Official to:

- CLEAN AIR:** Uphold environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act, which has given Americans the cleanest air in the world.
- CLEAN ENERGY:** Adopt a forward-looking national energy policy that is healthy, solution-oriented, sustainable, innovative, comprehensive, and promotes national security.
- ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:** Increase vigilance and awareness of development of power plants, hazardous waste sites, and incinerators in low-income or communities of color.
- PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE:** Build a robust public health infrastructure to handle the long-term needs of the population and health threats from poor air quality, toxics, and climate change.
- INTEGRITY OF SCIENCE:** Ensure the integrity of science in public health decision-making.
- CLIMATE CHANGE:** Implement policies to stem the threat of human induced global climate change.

I. CLEAN AIR

People Need Clean Air for Good Health.

Pollution from power plants and automobiles threatens people's health by contaminating our air, water, and food. Children and the elderly are particularly at risk from pollutants in the air. Certain pollutants, such as mercury, also make their way from the air into waterways and our food supply, threatening the health and development of children and fetuses. America's leaders must confront these pollution problems head-on, and implement cleaner, healthier solutions for the 21st century.





PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



- **Power plant and automobile air pollutants cause disease and death.** Currently, the fine particulates released into the air from power plants cause some 30,000 premature deaths annually in the United States. They also lead to increased healthcare costs, more asthma attacks, respiratory and heart disease, and decreased lung capacity. Asthma alone costs our country \$14 billion, 14.5 million lost workdays and 14 million missed schooldays, and disrupts 20 million American lives annually.
- **More than 25 million American children live in areas violating federal air quality standards for ozone, particulate matter, and sulfur dioxide.** Coal-fired power plants are responsible for the majority of these pollutants that threaten children's respiratory health, yet some 72,000 schools are located within a 30-mile radius of a power plant.
- **Mercury from coal burning power plants and other industrial sources has contaminated the nation's lakes, streams, and other bodies of water.** Once in water, mercury builds up in many fish species and can cause serious health risks for children and the future children of women who eat those fish. At least 40 states have issued fish advisories warning pregnant women or women of reproductive age to limit or avoid consuming freshwater fish that may be highly contaminated with mercury. Ocean fish are also contaminated, with swordfish, shark, king mackerel, tilefish, and fresh tuna having some of the highest levels.
- **Developing fetuses are particularly at risk from mercury exposure.** Health effects linked to prenatal exposure include poor performance on tests of attention and language, impaired memory, learning disorders, and impaired visual and motor function. Recent survey data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that almost 8% of U.S. women of childbearing age had mercury levels above what is considered safe for the fetus during pregnancy.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

All Communities Need Equal Protection from Environmental Threats

Environmental justice is achieved when everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, equivalent

ability to avoid risk from areas of environmental hazard, and equal access to decision-making processes that ensure a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.

- **Communities of color face increased odds for adverse health effects from air pollution and other environmental hazards.** Sixty-eight percent of African Americans versus 56% of the white population live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant the distance within which the maximum effects of the smokestack plume are expected to occur. In 2002, 71% of African Americans lived in counties that violate federal air pollution standards, compared to 58% of the white population.
- **Asthma prevalence is higher among people of minority or ethnic cultural backgrounds.** Approximately 86% of blacks and 91% of Hispanics, compared with 70% of whites, live in urban settings, where air pollution is most likely to be at its worst.

III. PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE

We Need to Understand the Connections Between Our Environment and Our Health

Americans are currently living in a society plagued by problems related to energy production and the way we build our communities, including chronic illnesses like asthma and heart disease and obesity related to the lack of physical activity. In addition, we have a public health system that is not necessarily prepared to address these concerns. We must provide our states and localities with the resources for a strong public health infrastructure that is able to assist all communities, regardless of the level of threat and the specific needs of the community.

- **States and localities do not have a systematic way of observing and evaluating the connection between disease rates and environmental exposures.** Developing and maintaining a nationwide environmental health tracking network will make it possible for scientists to do effective research on the kinds of exposures that can trigger or aggravate chronic diseases.
- **Steps need to be taken to reduce environmental hazards that contribute to disease clusters or rates of chronic illness.** Monitoring and cataloging the baseline rates of certain illnesses like asthma, heart disease, and diabetes will allow us access to a truer picture of the burden of disease across the country. Securing better knowledge of



PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



these baseline numbers will allow us to understand better the potential environmental exposures related to those illnesses. If these linkages between diseases and environmental exposure are addressed, we can work to achieve healthier and safer communities.

IV. INTEGRITY OF SCIENCE We Need Scientific Honesty and a Preventive Approach to Public Health Decision-Making

Using good science is key to solving our nation's environmental and other public health problems. When science is misused, public health may suffer. Americans trust our government to make decisions based on science uncontaminated by money, ideology, and preconceived political agendas. To ensure this, elected officials must demand new guidelines and criteria for the use of science. At the same time, decision makers must put public health first by applying a preventive approach in circumstances when reasonable concerns are raised despite scientific uncertainty.

- **Public health is vulnerable to scientific misuse and censorship.** Recently, government agencies have been accused of using scientific information selectively to support political goals. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency censored scientific information about climate change from a June 2003 comprehensive report on the state of the nation's environment. In addition, key federal scientific and public health advisory committees, such as the Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention, have been restructured, with qualified members replaced by individuals who are less qualified and have clear conflicts of interest. Nominees for peer-review committees, such as a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health study section, have been investigated for their political leanings rather than their scientific qualifications.
- **Current rules governing the use of science in decision-making are insufficient.** There are currently no government-wide, uniform standards for the use of science in decision making, for determining and managing conflicts of interest or achieving balance on federal scientific and public health advisory committees, or for determining the scientific or expert qualifications of candidates for such committees. Similarly, there are no government-wide guidelines for health protective decision-making in the absence of definitive science.

V. CLIMATE CHANGE We Need to Protect Future Generations from Catastrophic Global Climate Change Caused by Human Activities

From melting glaciers to steadily rising sea levels to the increasing risk of infectious tropical diseases around the world, the emerging impacts of global warming threaten our environment and our health. Scientists agree that polluting industries and over-reliance on fossil fuels have dramatically increased the amount of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Finding effective solutions to global warming must be a priority for policy makers.

- **Not enough is being done based on sound and well-accepted climate science.** Broad public and research consensus supports the science linking human contributions to rapid global warming and its subsequent impact on health. Investigators predict rising vector-borne infectious disease rates, including 50–80 million additional cases of malaria annually, and an increasing risk heat-related death, drowning, hunger, malnutrition, and injuries related to extreme weather events.
- **The lack of international cooperation is perpetuating practices that cause climate change.** The United States needs to coordinate its policies on climate change with global partners in the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and other multilateral institutions. Adopting pollutant controls that include mandatory limits on carbon dioxide emissions, here and around the world, represent a critical step in the ongoing international effort to restabilize the global climate.

SOLUTIONS Therefore, as physicians, health professionals and concerned citizens, we call on elected officials to:

1. **CLEAN AIR: Uphold environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act, which has given Americans the cleanest air in the world.**
 - Require old, dirty power plants to clean up their operations.
 - Reduce and prevent further emissions of toxic pollutants such as mercury from power plants and other industrial sources.



PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



- Implement a variety of strategies to regulate emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and carbon dioxide from power plants and transportation sectors to 2000 levels by 2010 and 1990 levels by 2016.
 - Provide incentives to promote cleaner industrial technologies to keep our environment safe.
- 2. CLEAN ENERGY: Adopt a forward-looking national energy policy that is healthy, solution-oriented, sustainable, innovative, comprehensive, and promotes national security.**
- Promote energy efficiency and conservation, while decreasing our reliance on dirty fossil fuels and outdated technologies.
 - Increase fuel efficiency standards to 40 miles per gallon, raising the 1975 standard of automobiles receiving only 27.5 miles per gallon and closing the sport utility vehicle and light truck loophole.
 - Ensure that at least 10% of the nation's electricity needs are met by clean renewable energy sources, such as wind, solar, or clean biomass by 2020.
 - Provide tax incentives for the expansion of clean, renewable energy sectors.
- 3. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: Increase vigilance and awareness of development of power plants, hazardous waste sites, and incinerators in low-income or communities of color.**
- Implement fully Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice and ensure that environmental justice is a cornerstone of legislative and regulatory decision-making.
 - Encourage inclusion of minority and vulnerable populations in all federally funded studies linking environmental exposures and health status.
- 4. PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE: Build a robust public health infrastructure to handle the long-term needs of the population and health threats from poor air quality, toxics, and climate change.**
- Develop and pass legislation in support of nationwide environmental public health tracking.
 - Ensure adequate funding for public health departments at the state and local level, recognizing the dual function of these departments. Dual-function systems recognize that the same resources and skill sets are necessary whether the focus of investigation is reemerging infectious disease, a terrorist attack, or a community cluster of chronic illness.
- 5. INTEGRITY OF SCIENCE: Ensure the integrity of science in public health decision-making.**
- Put in place government-wide standards and criteria.
 - Consult the best, most qualified scientists in agency decision making.
- 6. CLIMATE CHANGE: Implement policies to stem the threat of human induced global climate change.**
- Increase efforts to improve public understanding of global warming and its causes and effects.
 - Support energy conservation, clean, renewable energy alternatives, and multi-pollutant clean air standards that include mandatory limits on carbon dioxide.
 - Engage in collective efforts with the international community, including the Kyoto Protocol, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

For more information please contact **Rasa Zimlicki, MS**, Field Coordinator for Environment and Health (202) 667-4260 x226.