



**Achieving
Environmental Justice
by Building Healthy Communities
Since 1988!**

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November 16, 2012

Honorable Ed Whitfield, Chairman
Subcommittee on Energy and Power
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2368 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Whitfield,

WE ACT for Environmental Justice (aka West Harlem Environmental Action), is a Northern Manhattan community-based environmental justice advocacy organization. For the past 24 years, our mission has been to build healthy communities by assuring that people of color and/or low-income participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices. While we are headquartered in Harlem, New York, we have recently opened an office in DC to increase the amount of engagement on various environmentally related federal policy issues where typically, the voices of the communities we work with are unheard.

In anticipation of the third round of your upcoming Clean Air Act (CAA) Forum that has been announced for the Subcommittee on Energy and Power, we wanted to impart some general comments, from an environmental justice perspective that will hopefully expand the breadth of your conversation, as well as provide some filler for the lack of representation from the environmental justice community, to our knowledge, that has not been truly represented in the previous two forums.

Because the goal of this forum is for members to hear different perspectives and experiences about implementing the CAA, we thought it might be useful to share our perspectives from 2 vantage points: by our experiences with working with those commissioners, directors and officers that are responsible at the local, state and federal level for implementing components of the CAA; and, secondly, the documented experiences of the infants, children, the elderly, and others members of our community in Harlem, New York, as well as other communities we represent that continue to be impacted by poor air quality.

Historically, WE ACT has worked work with all levels of government – from community boards/districts, mayors, governments and several of our state environmental and health agencies. In fact, our organization was born out of a CAA issue - the lack of clean air, nuisance smells, pollution and negative respiratory and cardiovascular health impacts from the North River Sewage treatment plant that was constructed over 20 years ago and continues to operate in our community. While we were able to garner some appeasements through a lawsuit, there still remains the impact of this plant on the health of our community. We understand the challenges of implementing federal rules at the state level. However, we hope that despite the belief that more regulations will only kill jobs our economy and cost money, we hope you also consider the cost of missed work days, the cost of treatment for respiratory related diseases and the cost of the quality of life expended by many individuals if regulations like the Particulate Matter Standard, the Ozone Standard, the Mercury Air Toxics Standard and many others are not enforced at effective levels to improve public health.

From a national perspective, WE ACT is the convener of a national forum of 40 environmental justice organizations representing 18 states, including Kentucky and many others. Typically when we convene our members, clean air is a top concern, especially in urban areas. The health of the communities of our coalition members is directly related to regulations that are implemented through the CAA. Often times, clean air is just ONE of many issues our communities are disproportionately impacted by. There have been multiple research studies that document, in regards to health outcomes such as mortality and morbidity, certain populations that are typically more vulnerable than others. So we would hope that as you consider any upcoming or proposed clean air legislation, you and your committee members consider the most vulnerable and do all that you can to protect them. Any efforts or headway to reduce the impact of certain environmental stressors, especially air pollutants, is an important piece of the puzzle to improving the quality of lives for many Americans.

In summary, we hope that the discussion in your upcoming forum will take a couple things into consideration.

- **Protect health:** The public health of the communities that you and your committee members serve, should always be at the center of your conversation. If not, the Committee's documented "overarching role in health and safety" is forgotten.
- **Provide the facts:** Based on previous discussion questions, we hope that your participants will provide 'best practices' or 'case studies' that describe how they have addressed local public health protection AND sustained local economic growth. It would be important for this discussion and future discussions to have the 'hard facts' to document the challenges you and your Committee frequently use as the basis for your arguments to delay and circumvent any efforts to move elements of the CAA forward.
- **Present a balanced perspective:** The stated goal of these forums is to provide a 'broad range of perspectives'. It would be useful to ensure that the participants are diverse in location, urban/rural, as well as stakeholders that work specifically with environmental justice communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our simple comments and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

WE ACT for Environmental Justice

Cc: Members of the Subcommittee on Energy and Power