

I wish to thank the organizing committee for the invitation to speak at this wonderful event. I am the Director of the Lyle Center for Regenerative Studies at Cal Poly Pomona University, a center focused on the environment, which is committed to a future in which all people live with dignity in safe, healthy, and sustainable communities. I'm also a member of Clean & Green Pomona, a local organization fighting for pro-environmental action here in the City. I'm here to speak to you today about the state of our local environment, the impact of pollution on all of our lives, and the way in which these impacts disproportionately affect communities of color and low income communities, right here in the Pomona Valley.

The Impact of Pollution on our Communities

Many describe climate change as the most critical environmental issue facing our planet in the 21st Century. I'm sure I don't have to tell you about the overwhelming scientific evidence which links the impact of human activity, primarily the burning of fossil fuels in our cars, trucks and power plants, to this phenomenon. And I'm sure that you've heard the predictions about the likelihood of temperature shifts, drought, fires, and sea-level rise that threaten communities around the globe. Indeed the pollution we collectively describe as greenhouse gases is an issue that warrants not just our consideration, but also our immediate action at the local, global, national, and even international level.

But I worry sometimes that the focus on climate change, leads us down a pathway as environmentalists that ignores some of the shorter-term, local effects of pollution that I find just as disconcerting. That is one of the reasons I really appreciate the approach to the environment taken by the Climate Justice Initiative of the NAACP. It not only focuses on the issue of greenhouse gases as a major pollutant, but also other pollutants in our air, water and soil which pose a threat to our communities.

Researchers have long understood the effect that pollution has had on our public health. Air pollution in particular, has been linked to a wide variety of respiratory problems. In this valley, many of us are all too familiar with conditions such as asthma, that are exacerbated by ozone, particulate matter and related emissions from cars and trucks. Indeed this is a major concern for many, particularly for those most vulnerable in our communities: young children and the elderly. But there is a health concern that researchers are only beginning to understand, and which there is much less awareness within the broader community. As we learn more about particulate matter, the fine dust or soot that results from the burning of petroleum products, such as gasoline and diesel, researchers are discovering some shocking impacts. Recent evidence shows that ultra-fine particles, are capable of transmitting directly into our blood stream, which can contribute to a variety of circulatory problems leading to heart disease and other complications. In addition, some particulate matter, such as those associated with diesel exhaust, have been found to be carcinogenic by leading health organizations, including the State of California. And finally, some researchers have also found a link between the

accumulation of pollutants and obesity, a health concern which plagues many. These effects on circulatory disease and obesity, conditions long believed to be primarily the result of individual lifestyle choices, point to the impact that our environment has on our well-being.

How Impacts are Distributed

There are many pollutants which cause concern for communities, and attributing health problems to a single source is typically difficult to do. For this reason, the State of California chooses to focus on what is known as “cumulative pollution burdens” of communities, to characterize the range of pollutants and sources that an individual is exposed to over the course of their daily life. And the State has ranked every neighborhood, over 8,000 of them, with regard to the pollution burden, in order to identify communities that pose the greatest health risks to their residents.

Not surprisingly, many of these are communities of color, and many of them are right here in the Inland Valley. The neighborhoods immediately to the West and South of Ontario Airport are ranked 2nd and 3rd highest in the State in terms of pollution burden, and the Westmont neighborhood in Pomona is ranked 9th. Those rankings are in comparison to over 8,000 total neighborhoods. Three neighborhoods in the top ten? There is no part of the State that is more impacted by these burdens.

And when we look at top ten neighborhoods in terms of cumulative pollution burdens through the lens of race, we see the special impact these burdens have on communities of color. The percentage of people of color in these top ten neighborhoods is over 92%. Compare that with the ten neighborhoods with the lowest pollution burden, where the percentage of people of color is just 20%. Many have tried to argue that other factors, such as income, are the crucial variables that influence ones exposure to pollution, and that certainly plays a role in increasing risk. But numerous studies have shown that race is more reliable predictor of higher pollution exposure.

The Role of Petroleum

As I mentioned, these pollution burdens come from a variety of sources, including potential exposure to toxins from industrial activity. But today I am going to focus on a source of pollutants that I believe represent the greatest public health concern to our community, the burning of petroleum products, particularly diesel fuel and gasoline. Of course, we are all familiar with these products, and no doubt most of us burned some to get to this rally. We consider them to be part of the fabric of our daily life, for both work and pleasure. But the consequences of their use, from their contributions to climate change at the global level, to their contributions to other forms of air pollution at the local level, are most troubling.

Regulators, and many who have lived in this region for many years, are fond of discussing the improvements in air quality that have been made over the past 4 decades. And from a regional perspective, they are right, the improvements have been important and significant. But at the local level, in many neighborhoods right here in the valley, those closest to freeways and truck routes, those improvements are not being felt. This is evidenced by the pollution burden scores which we've been talking about. In our region, **over half** of the burden documented, can be linked directly to the burning of petroleum, gasoline and diesel, in our trucks and automobiles. ***In other words, no single action can have a more direct impact on improving the health of our communities, than reducing the consumption of petroleum in trucks and automobiles.***

I know that people say, "This is Southern California," "people need and love their cars," "you can't and won't get them to change." I'm here to say that the data is clear. Things must change. And it is inevitable that things will change. The question is, will our communities be ready to capitalize on this change as leaders, or will they suffer the fate they have suffered so often, being left out of innovation and investment as mere afterthoughts?

Pathways to a Regenerative Future.

As we consider ways in which positive change can occur around the reduction of petroleum, I believe there is great promise in the notion of community. Often, discussion about the need to change our personal habits for the betterment of the environment, revolves around the individual: what I can do, what I must do, as an individual, to change my behavior. The solution is often framed as a personal life-style change, one individual at a time. Anyone who has tried any form of self-improvement, from dieting to religious devotion, knows the difficulty of meeting such challenges, especially when our environment remains the same: full of temptation and foundations of the old way of life.

I would suggest if that if we are to be truly effective, we must move the focus from the individual to the community. What can we do, collectively, to reduce petroleum consumption? When framed this way, we begin to see possibilities for changing our environment in ways that support our changes in behavior. When the environment is supportive, the likelihood of success goes way up.

I have seen many examples where communities made conscious decisions to reduce reliance on trucks and automobiles. These decisions include efforts to locate jobs and schools in closer proximity to where we live; investing in infrastructure for walking, cycling, mass transit and safe routes to school; discouraging uses such as warehousing which increase local traffic and offer few living wage jobs in return; and developing innovative incentive and disincentive programs for businesses designed to curb their consumption.

These are examples of strategies that can be pursued at the local level, and they can make a difference, and it's a great place to start. But transportation is not just a local issue. It is

influenced by regional, state and federal policy. Communities like ours, which are most directly affected by the adverse consequences of petroleum consumption, must be involved in shaping policy at these levels. Do our elected officials really understand this burden we experience? Do they understand their obligation to protect our health, safety and welfare? Or are they unduly influenced by those who stand to profit from the status quo, without being subjected to the consequences?

Climate justice is about being personally and politically engaged at the family, neighborhood, municipal, county, state and federal levels in the fight for equity in burden and opportunity. I hope you'll join organizations like the NAACP, Clean & Green Pomona, United Voices of Pomona, and others in this fight. Thank you.