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Ambition, Restoration, and Justice: A Path Forward on Climate Solutions

Editor's Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column from ecoAmerica whose mission is to build public support and political resolve for climate solutions. NEHA is an official partner of ecoAmerica and works closely with their Climate for Health Program, a coalition of health leaders committed to caring for our climate to care for our health. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA.

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Climate change is moving to the forefront of concern for people in the U.S. and all over the world. Accelerating climate-change charged events, including wildfires, floods, severe storms, displacement of people, and economic damage, cannot be ignored. We all need to consider new strategies to amplify the effectiveness of our work to mitigate and prepare for these impacts in our communities and the nation.

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) as an institution and environmental health professionals as individuals have a critical role to play in climate solutions. Working at the intersections where people live, work, learn, and recreate, environmental health professionals are on the front lines of ambitious climate solutions that protect our health, help restore our natural environment, and achieve a more just and equitable future. NEHA leads this

charge with its exemplary climate change policy statement and clean energy declaration (National Environmental Health Association, 2018), as well as initiatives like the full day of climate change and health programming at its Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition.

NEHA and ecoAmerica have partnered for several years now on climate and health initiatives, most recently at the 9th annual American Climate Leadership Summit. The theme for this summit—Ambition, Restoration, and Justice—is a good framework for environmental health professionals to think about the issue and their interventions.

We must move from disparate and fledgling mitigation efforts to greater *ambition*. Current goals are too weak and too far away. We need 100% clean energy by 2035. We need to begin taking carbon out of the atmosphere on a larger scale as fast as we can. We

need to move from adaptation to *restoration*. Healthy nature can restore itself and heal the planet. We need to help nature by reversing the pollution we have emitted and restoring our forests and waters. The most impactful thing we can do to restore the planet is to simply stop burning fossil fuels. Finally, we need to move toward a broader understanding of climate *justice*. We need to help workers and communities that provided fossil fuels to transition to new livelihoods. And we must address our education, health, wealth, and racial disparities.

The ambition, restoration, and justice framework can lead to timely and effective solutions when grounded in three straightforward observations. We are amidst a true climate emergency, solutions are available now, and they must be solved in a broader social context by all of us working together.

The climate emergency perspective and health impacts are more apparent than ever. The 2020 hurricane season in the Atlantic is one of the most active and severe (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2020), fires are raging in the western part of the U.S. and are making it difficult for people to breathe, and people across the country have experienced swelteringly hot record temperatures this past summer. A decade ago, climate change was something that was going to happen to us in the future; people spoke of incremental sea level rise and made predictions for the years 2030, 2050, and 2100. What we know now is that climate change is here, impacting our health and well-being, and getting worse every year. As environmental health professionals help their communities address climate impacts,

“Climate change is impacting all aspects of our environmental health work—air, water, vector control, food, safety, and the built environment.

... If you have not started to address this impact of climate change in your community, you must start now.” (Radke, 2018, p. 6)

— Vince Radke, 2018–2019 President, National Environmental Health Association

urgency needs to be at the forefront. If we do not act now, the impacts of climate change will be irreversible.

At the same time, over the past decade or so, we have developed all the climate solutions we need to address climate change. Today, we are retiring more fossil fuel plants than we are building and renewable energy availability and affordability are increasing (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2020). We are electrifying transit fleets and making electric cars more accessible with the promise of building more efficient heavy industry and aviation. Corporations like Microsoft are paving the path for us all to not only achieve carbon neutrality but also remove our historic emissions. Natural solutions like tree planting, green roofs, and more permeable surfaces are available today. Carbon pollution removal technologies are also on the rise. It is now a matter of implementation. Environmental health professionals are well positioned to advocate for cost-effective climate solutions in their companies, organizations, and communities.

As we address the solutions, we need to keep in mind that climate change is a social problem as much as a technical or policy issue. Our climate, public health, economic, democratic, and racial crises are intertwined, rooted in the same systemic injustice. Climate change can be addressed as an integral part of housing, education, agriculture, transportation, and electricity generation.

Many environmental health professionals are familiar with the Health in All Policies

(HiAP) approach. Health is influenced by many factors and is not simply the absence of disease. HiAP integrates and articulates health considerations into policy making across sectors to improve the health of all communities and people (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). We should consider climate change across decision making in the same manner.

As the visible impacts of climate change accelerate, so has concern. From a recent survey, 74% of Americans now report being concerned about climate change, including almost one half (45%) who are very concerned. An additional 14% are a little concerned, bringing the total to 88%. So why aren't we up in arms about climate change? Analyzing one step further, while 45% say they are very concerned, only one half as many (23%) believe others around them are very concerned (ecoAmerica, 2020a). Americans are also more aligned on climate change than it seems: 88% agree that Republicans and Democrats should find a way to work together to address climate change (ecoAmerica, 2020b).

Environmental health professionals need to step up and help close this gap by connecting the dots on climate change and health to motivate action on climate solutions. Environmental health professionals get it. When NEHA members were asked, “If the United States took steps to help prevent future climate change, would it affect your health,” nearly three quarters (72%) responded that it would improve their health compared

with 66% of national respondents (McAdams, Rehr, Kobayashi, & DeArman, 2019). When we work to reduce the gap between those who are concerned but do not think others are and when we reach across the aisle to work on climate solutions, these are the principles that yield results. We can lead on climate solutions, we can be bold now, and we will do it together. 🐼

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