

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 22, 2020

The Honorable Andrew R. Wheeler
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20460-0001

Dear Administrator Wheeler:

As our nation is in the midst of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the resulting respiratory illness (COVID-19), we write with regard to the staggering number of COVID-19 deaths within minority and low-income communities and the vital nature of clean air protections.

As you know, in 1970 Congress granted the Environmental Protection Agency authority to establish limits on air pollutants through the Clean Air Act. Since enactment and subsequent amendment, this law has become an essential means to protect individuals from harmful air pollutants — especially disproportionately impacted minority and low-income communities. We are, therefore, deeply concerned by ongoing efforts to stifle the progression of crucial clean air protections.

Studies make clear that minority and low-income communities unevenly bear the brunt of the consequences associated with fine particulate matter air pollution. According to the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, African-American and Latinx-American communities are exposed to an average of 60 percent more air pollution than they cause.¹ Additionally, our nation's low-income communities are disparately exposed to higher concentrations of air pollution than any other socioeconomic group.²

Exposure to particulate matter air pollutants, especially fine particulate matter, is the cause of 63 percent of all environmentally caused deaths in the United States.³ Moreover, science links pollution of this variety to severe lung and heart complications including irregular heartbeat, impaired lung function, asthma, and premature death in individuals with existing heart or lung disease.⁴

¹ Christopher W. Tessum, et al., *Inequity in consumption of goods and services adds to racial-ethnic disparities in air pollution exposure*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (Mar. 26, 2019).

² Anjum Hajat, et al., *Socioeconomic Disparities and Air Pollution Exposure: A Global Review*, Current Environmental Health Reports (Sept. 18, 2015).

³ University of Washington Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluations, *GBD Compare Data Visualization* (<https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-compare/>)(accessed Apr. 15, 2020).

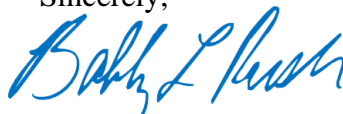
⁴ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Particulate Matter (PM) Pollution: Health and Environmental Effects of Particulate Matter (PM) (<https://www.epa.gov/pm-pollution/health-and-environmental-effects-particulate-matter-pm>) (accessed Apr. 15, 2020).

Recently, Harvard University released a study of the rate of long-term air pollution exposure in relation to COVID-19 mortality rates in U.S. counties. Researchers concluded COVID-19 patients in areas with high air pollution levels have a greater likelihood of dying from the illness.⁵ Additional data shows that these counties are more likely to be populated by minority and low-income individuals.⁶ Keeping in mind the connectivity of these studies, minorities account for 60 percent of all U.S. COVID-19 deaths⁷ despite representing only 40 percent of the current population.⁸

For these reasons, we are alarmed by EPA — the agency authorized to enhance clean air protections — taking actions that are contrary to its mission. Under this Administration, EPA has rolled back nearly 100 environmental regulations. One quarter of these rollbacks dismantled much needed air pollution and emissions regulations. Equally alarming are the most recent announcements to retain current National Ambient Air Quality Standards for particulate matter and the laxation of Mercury and Air Toxics Standards, which regulate emissions from coal- and oil-fired power plants. This not only flies in the face of scientific evidence linking air pollution to lethal COVID-19 outcomes, but also disregards EPA staff scientist recommendations to reduce levels — putting thousands of additional lives at risk, annually.⁹

The correlative nature between this pandemic and the very core of EPA’s work, which is to protect human health and the environment, necessitates swift action to secure equal rights to vital clean air protections. We, therefore, urge prompt intervention to prevent irreversible harm to our communities.

Sincerely,



Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

⁵ Xiao Wu and Rachel C. Nethery, *Exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States* (April 5, 2020).

⁶ Miranda ML, et al., *Making the Environmental Justice Grade: The Relative Burden of Air Pollution Exposure in the United States*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (Jun. 2011).

⁷ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, *Provisional Death Counts for Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19: Weekly State- Specific Data Update by Select Demographic and Geographic Characteristics* (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid_weekly/) (accessed Apr. 15, 2020).

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>) (accessed Apr. 15, 2020).

⁹ *Trump officials reject stricter air quality standards, despite link between air pollution, coronavirus risks*, Washington Post (Apr. 14, 2020); U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards, *Policy Assessment for the Review of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for Particulate Matter, External Review Draft* (Sep. 2019); *E.P.A. Weakens Controls on Mercury*, The New York Times (Apr. 16, 2020).

/s/
John Lewis
Member of Congress

/s/
José E. Serrano
Member of Congress

/s/
Maxine Waters
Member of Congress

/s/
Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress

/s/
Robert C. “Bobby” Scott
Member of Congress

/s/
Bennie G. Thompson
Member of Congress

/s/
Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

/s/
Diana DeGette
Member of Congress

/s/
Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress

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John B. Larson
Member of Congress

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Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

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Eliot L. Engel
Member of Congress

/s/
David Price
Member of Congress

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Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

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Lucille Roybal-Allard
Member of Congress

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Nydia M. Velázquez
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Mike Doyle
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Danny K. Davis
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Adam Smith
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Barbara Lee
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Grace F. Napolitano
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Wm. Lacy Clay
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Jim Costa
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Kathy Castor
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Stephen F. Lynch
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Linda T. Sánchez
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Al Green
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Albio Sires
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Yvette D. Clarke
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Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

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Peter Welch
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Ben Ray Luján
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Mike Quigley
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Bill Foster
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Cedric L. Richmond
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Frederica S. Wilson
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Joyce Beatty
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Tony Cárdenas
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Joseph P. Kennedy, III
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Alan Lowenthal
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Juan Vargas
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Brenda L. Lawrence
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Dwight Evans
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Lisa Blunt Rochester
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Darren Soto
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TJ Cox
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Deb Haaland
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Andy Levin
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
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Harley Rouda
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Eleanor Holmes Norton
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A. Donald McEachin
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Jesús G. “Chuy” García
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Jahana Hayes
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Debbie Mucarsel-Powell
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Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress

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Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress