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 serve lung and heart complications including irregular heartbeat, impaired lung function, asthma, and premature death in individuals with existing heart or lung disease.4

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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).
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. Additional data shows that these counties are more likely to be populated by minority and low-income individuals. Keeping in mind the connectivity of these studies, minorities account for 60 percent of all U.S. COVID-19 deaths despite representing only 40 percent of the current population.

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.

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

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