

# Fossil fuels endanger communities of color | Opinion

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Let's work to make sure that, when the switch to clean, renewable energy comes, it fulfills the promise of equal benefits for all – not just the well off, say the Rev. Ronald Tuff and Nancy Griffeth, a member of the Environmental Justice Advisory Council of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

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By **Ronald Tuff and Nancy Griffeth**

Our beliefs require us, as people of faith, to support equity and justice for all. This includes health and a clean environment. “Black Lives Matter” is a basic principle, but Black lives are lost daily due to the effects of pollution. In addition to the loss of life, job loss due to the pandemic is most severe in communities of color.

Much of the degradation comes from fossil fuels, which emit not only carbon dioxide that causes global warming and flooding but also dangerous chemicals like sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter that cause many health problems.

[New Jersey's Energy Master Plan](#) is a long step in the right direction. Attacks on it by those claiming it will increase the cost of energy for households that struggle to make ends meet are way off target. These claims ignore the falling cost of renewable energy and the master plan's health and economic benefits.

The Energy Master Plan will reduce environmental damage, increase job opportunities and improve health in low-income communities. But a cynical campaign

by a fossil-industry front group seeks to deceive low-income communities and people of color. This group has assumed a Trojan Horse name: [Consumer Energy Alliance](#). The CEA uses scare tactics backed by false assertions to try to convince people to oppose clean energy – even holding gatherings in Black churches to falsely preach that moving to wind and solar will force everyone to pay thousands of dollars for new home appliances. With questionable studies and commentaries ghostwritten for faith leaders, they suggest that the same fossil fuels, [whose emissions cause asthma](#) and lead to [higher cancer rates](#) and [heart disease](#), will somehow offer energy salvation. Rather than take advice from fossil fuel shills who aim to delay the transition to clean energy, let's work to make sure that, when the switch to clean, renewable energy comes, it fulfills the promise of equal benefits for all – not just the well off.

As the dreadful COVID-19 pandemic shows us, health comes first. As Gandhi said, “It is health that is real wealth, not pieces of gold and silver.” Burning fossil fuels contributes to climate change that dangerously warms the atmosphere and raises ocean levels — and puts pollutants into the air that cause disease and death. [One review](#) of the impact of air pollution on low-income communities said, “air pollution is responsible for at least 5 million premature deaths per year. This burden disproportionately affects the world’s most vulnerable populations.”

In the U.S., [studies show](#) that lower-income “individuals and communities are exposed to higher concentrations of criteria air pollutants.”

Renewables already cost less than natural gas and other fossil fuels and will cost even less as usage increases. Like switching to any new technology, moving to renewables will require major investment, and it is true that such investments are too frequently funded by the [Societal Benefits Charge](#) everyone pays as a flat percentage of their electric bill. The lower a household’s income, the higher percentage of that income it pays for utilities, so the fee hits the least affluent the hardest. And, the benefits of the fee, such as rebates for solar panels and new electric vehicles, go mostly to upper-income households. That must change!

Environmental Justice advocates need to spend their time working for regulations and laws that would correct these problems, [such as S-2484](#), which would establish an office of Clean Energy Equity.

Thankfully, New Jersey has come up with ways to benefit low-income households, including the [Community Solar Pilot Project](#) that will make solar energy available to low- and moderate-income households that can’t use solar panels, either because they are renters or because of issues with their roof.

Also, New Jersey has [a new law](#) requiring the state Department of Environmental Protection to consider “cumulative impacts” when reviewing permit applications for polluting projects in environmentally overburdened communities. In the past, the DEP could consider only the impact of a power plant or factory in isolation.

The investments required to transition to renewables will also create local jobs offering good wages – installing solar panels, building wind turbines and connecting them all to the electrical grid, as well as working in the energy efficiency field.

Necessary certifications can be a hindrance to this, so apprenticeships on installation sites for members of low-income communities must be provided. The state needs to support training for new workers in these fields and unions need to encourage membership from low-income communities and communities of color.

The task for supporters of environmental justice is to make sure the environmental damage that is killing members of those communities is reversed and that costs and benefits are distributed equitably.

Let's not let the fossil fuel industry hoodwink us into fighting against our own interests.

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