

Written by Katherine T. Eglund
Monday, 09 December 2013 12:16

Last month I left my home in balmy Gulfport, Miss., crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and spent two weeks in chilly Warsaw, Poland at the 19th Session of the Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. I was willing to trade in my sandals for snow boots in order to address the impacts of climate change.

As host to one of the worst coal-fired power plants on an environmental justice scale and some of the most damaging hurricanes to hit the US mainland, my home town of Gulfport and the entire state of Mississippi have a large stake in addressing climate-changing emissions and putting measures in place to deal with the impacts.

Unfortunately, Mississippi missed an opportunity to be hailed as a viable innovator in climate change and energy efficiency when the state government chose to certify the building of the Kemper County energy facility. Instead, the state allowed the Southern Company to burden its ratepayers with financing the use of lignite, yet another form of coal; astronomical cost overruns; mounting delays, rather than opting for renewable energy sources.

However, this issue is not localized to Gulfport. It affects the entire world. From Hurricane Katrina Super Storm Sandy, and tornadoes in the Midwest, extreme droughts in Texas and the rise in sea levels worldwide, the effects of climate change are becoming progressively more pronounced. At the forefront of this year's climate talks was the devastation that Super Typhoon Haiyan wreaked on the Philippines, just three days prior to the official opening day of the conference. The conference also focused on the proliferation of coal as the main source of energy for Poland and other nations, much to the detriment of the environment.

It is often simpler for some to attribute the pronounced shifts in weather patterns to acts of nature, rather than accepting the proven reality of man's contributions in manipulating nature's balance. And the fossil fuel industry capitalizes on this flawed logic, by using its considerable wealth lobbying to continue polluting with impunity. In fact, the World Coal Association and Poland's Economy Ministry organized their own conference during the last week of the UN climate change conference in Warsaw and promoted it as the "coal industry's event of the year", asserting that coal is essential to Poland's electricity generation.

We can no longer allow global governments' continued failure to act. The NAACP views climate change through a civil and human rights lens, recognizing how climate change and its drivers impact rights to health, livelihood, culture, safe habitats, and more.

And we are not alone in this fight. UN Climate Secretariat Christiana Figueres accepted an invitation to address the coal industry at their opening session and issued a stark warning to them to "close existing, inefficient plants.....or risk accelerating global warming to potentially catastrophic levels." This sentiment was echoed in the actions of the NAACP and many civil society groups, who, frustrated with the refusal of governments to make the necessary commitments on emissions reduction, clean energy development and funding for preparing communities to deal with the impacts of climate change, walked out of UN Climate Negotiations in Warsaw several days before the talks ended, vowing to shore up and return in 2014 to push hard for stronger targets.

Written by Katherine T. Eglund
Monday, 09 December 2013 12:16

We all have a responsibility to leave this world better than we found it. We should note that as long as the world maintains the dominance of coal as a power source, we will all be vulnerable to the escalating perils of climate change, like the annual catastrophic storms we must weather in Gulfport. God forbid that we should forsake our obligation at the expense of our posterity.



Kathy Eglund is chairman of the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee of the National NAACP Board of Directors. Contact: Ben Wrobel at Bwrobel@naacpnet.org