

## Changing attitudes about green living

Written by Jazelle Hunt, NNPA Washington Correspondent  
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – A record-high 356 temperatures were tied or broken across the contiguous United States in 2012, marking the warmest year ever in American history. Over that same period, widespread droughts, wildfires, hurricanes, snowstorms, and superstorms put a nearly \$110 billion dent in the economy.

And according to environmental activists, that's something Blacks should be concerned about.

"If natural disasters happen, or heat waves, or prices go up for food and gas, then African Americans get the short end of the stick in those situations," explained Bruce Strouele, director of operations for Citizens for a Sustainable Future, a think-tank dedicated to improving quality of life for African Americans through sustainable development and environmental justice. "When you look at research on sustainable development, before it can even take place you have to be economically situated to make those improvements. For a lot of our people it seems out of reach, or like it's something that's not for us."

But it is.

Studies have shown that poor people and people of color are most vulnerable to pollution and its climate-altering effects. For example, research from the University of Minnesota released last month found that people of color are exposed to 38 percent more polluted air than Whites, with the most stark disparities in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan, and New Jersey.

But despite being disproportionately affected, experts say many African Americans are uninformed about or uninterested in sustainability, let alone climate change.

However, Strouele thinks that climate change and sustainability become more relevant when framed as economic issues.

"Sustainability may look different for our community. When we talk about Black sustainability we have to talk about issues that are more practical... some may be focused on high-speed rail, but for us it might be as simple as getting fresh food to people in the community," Strouele says. "So we focus on aspects that do relate, like food deserts, breastfeeding, and other little things

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that not only lessen your carbon footprint but also improve your health."

Last week, President Obama turned his "pen-and-phone" power toward the deepening climate change crisis with a new climate change plan. The goals include maximizing sustainable, affordable and low-income housing, and reducing energy costs for ordinary Americans.

The plan directs the Department of Interior to approve permits for 100 megawatts of renewable energy capacity across federally-subsidized housing by 2020. Federally subsidized housing includes public housing, multi-family buildings using Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, apartments and homes that accept Section 8, housing choice vouchers, etc.

This is enough energy to power 10 such households for an entire year, without ever using costly fossil fuels. (In the United States, a majority of utility companies generate electricity and heat by burning coal). Today's upgraded homes usually use renewables as a supplement for traditional energy, instead of a replacement.

Additionally, the plan sets aside a \$23 million Multifamily Energy Innovation Fund, which offers grants to rental developers, universities, and organizations to test out new ways to make cost-effective, clean energy more commonplace. A separate \$250 million fund program will offer loans and grants to help rural utility companies upgrade the homes and businesses they serve.

On a more privatized level, the administration is expanding its Better Building Challenge to include multi-family housing developers. With this initiative, developers are challenged to build more affordable and low-income housing with a commitment to sustainable and green living. The developers must publicly commit to a 20-percent reduction in energy use across their properties by 2020.

Improving sustainability standards in affordable residential development also improves their quality, according to Bryan Howard, legislative director for the U.S. Green Building Council. Howard advocates for clean energy and sustainability among the nation's lawmakers.

"In states that have taken an aggressive approach to adding sustainability, it enhances the quality of housing in those states. It's not only sustainability, but walkability, healthiness—like making sure there are air filters, because there's a high level of asthma and respiratory problems in public housing—making sure public housing isn't situated in discarded areas of town," he says. "I think the issue of sustainability has been a gateway conversation to start permeating discussions around public housing...and starting to address some of these issues."

It provides an opportunity for developers...to talk to the communities about their needs and what they want out of new development projects."

Further, the president's plan strengthens federal efficiency standards for household appliances. In short, these efforts not only cut national pollution, but also cut energy bills for all Americans. The Obama administration says it has already upgraded 1 million homes for energy efficiency, saving families more than \$400 on their heating and cooling bills per year.

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Howard explains, "When we talk to people about wanting to save money on heat bills...people respond to that more than talking about climate change directly. It's far more interesting, as opposed to [climate change], or something that may not feel as directly impactful."