

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Georgia Sierra Club chair: Environmental justice in Georgia needs bold investments

Phyllis Richardson Guest Columnist

Published 6:00 a.m. ET April 12, 2022

This is an op-ed by Phyllis Richardson, chapter chair of the Georgia Sierra Club.

In his first year in office, President Joe Biden put forth the most ambitious plan to tackle climate change that has ever been proposed, and I was thrilled to hear him recommit to climate action in his first State of the Union and again with the release of his 2023 budget proposal released in late March.

The commitments he made are critical in Savannah and Georgia as a whole, where communities are suffering from rising temperatures, a reliance on dirty fossil fuels for energy, extreme weather events, and long-standing environmental injustices.

Now, during Earth Month, I urge Sens. Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock to follow the president's lead and prioritize action on climate change and environmental justice by pushing their colleagues in the Senate to pass the \$550 billion in climate and jobs investments that the U.S. House of Representatives passed late last year.

Feeling the heat, and the floods

All of Georgia's communities are feeling the impacts of climate change, but none more so than our communities of color, whose neighborhoods experience higher energy costs and flood risks, and more pollution. These same communities have historically been used as statistics and demographics to support grant awards and government programs, but rarely do they see the resulting benefits.

Here in Savannah, a majority Black city, environmental injustice is nothing new. In 1992, 200,000 picocuries of tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, leaked from the Savannah River Site, a nuclear plant, into the river - more than 10 times the amount considered safe to drink.

More about the leak: No groundwater risks at Savannah River Site

Now, the city is facing an unprecedented rise in sea level. By 2030, Savannah could experience more than 30 tidal floods per year, three times the number we see today. For our Black communities, which are expected to be the worst hit by rising sea levels caused by climate change, these projections are particularly devastating.

And it's not just flooding that presents risks to Black communities along Georgia's coast. Just look to the south in Brunswick, where the majority Black population has been plagued for decades with pollution from Superfund sites, polluted locations undergoing long-term efforts to clean up hazardous materials. Climate change-caused heat waves, which are on the rise here in Georgia, also disproportionately impact communities of color.

Without federal support, I fear things in Georgia won't change. For the past five years, I have worked tirelessly with other environmental advocates to convince our state and local lawmakers to act on climate, but they have consistently failed to make meaningful change. While there are some lawmakers who are committed to delivering on environmental justice and clean energy, our state legislature has proven time and time again that they lack the will to enact the reforms we critically need.

If Congress doesn't act now to invest in Georgia's communities of color and address the climate crisis, Black communities will experience more deaths and more property loss.

Creating jobs and saving our future

The Biden administration stated that it will deliver 40% of infrastructure and climate investment benefits to underserved communities. While historically communities of color have received the least amount of investment in clean energy technologies and resilient infrastructure, these provisions will deliver environmental justice by ensuring the investments and initiatives go directly to the communities on the ground that need them most.

These investments in clean energy will also deliver vast economic benefits for Georgia. They would create almost 110,000 new jobs in Georgia over the next five years.

More about emissions and climate change: Emissions data aims to help Georgians target climate change solutions, energy poverty

The president has called for clean energy tax credits that would create good-paying jobs and would simultaneously lower energy prices for Georgia families by an average of \$500 per year.

President Biden also called for lowering the price of electric vehicles, which would reduce the amount families pay at the gas pump. This is particularly important for communities of color, which pay a higher portion of their monthly income on fuel than white communities. These clean energy investments would also provide opportunities for new small businesses and startups in communities of color and create inclusion among young adults and the business community.

Georgians are ready for environmental justice, clean water and air, lower energy costs, and family-sustaining jobs. But we need federal support to get it done. I thank Sens. Warnock and Ossoff for their past commitment to environmental justice and climate action.

As we mark Earth Month, we need them and the rest of the Senate to prioritize the climate and act swiftly to pass \$550 billion in climate and jobs investments, and deliver tangible results to communities of color here in Georgia and across the country.