

Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
Witness Testimony
of
Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester

Legislative Hearing to Examine S. 1345, the Comprehensive National Mercury Monitoring Act; S. 2476, the Environmental Justice Air Quality Monitoring Act of 2021; and S. ____, the Public Health Air Quality Act

July 13, 2022

Good morning Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, members of the Committee, and fellow witnesses.

I want to start by thanking the Chairman and Ranking Member for calling today's hearing and for giving me the opportunity to speak about the need to protect the health and wellbeing of all Americans by expanding our air quality monitoring system. I also want to thank Senator Duckworth for her leadership and partnership on this important issue.

“Living with a time bomb.” That was the headline emblazoned across the front page of Delaware's largest paper, the News Journal earlier this year. The story underneath the headline went on to describe the fear and anxiety that residents of New Castle County's Route 9 corridor feel every day, as they live in the shadow of chemical and industrial plants. Communities such as—Newport, Belvedere, and Southbridge have lived with this reality – with this time bomb – for decades – and suffer from higher cancer rates and respiratory hazards as a result.

This is an issue of justice— both environmental and racial— and justice cannot come as an afterthought. It must be at the center of our response.

We know that decades of discrimination and environmental racism have resulted in a disproportionate number of communities of color at the frontlines, where they risk significant disparities in health outcomes.

These disparities are then passed on from generation to generation – it's past time to break the cycle.

Communities like the ones I described in New Castle County aren't an anomaly—communities across the country that neighbor industrial and chemical facilities are more likely to suffer from higher rates of cancer and respiratory disease.

In these communities, it is often the most vulnerable, including children and the elderly, that suffer the most from air pollution health emergencies. For example, exposure to toxic pollutants during a child's development phase has been shown to cause lifelong health and education problems—and ongoing exposure to toxic pollutants may cause premature death in the elderly population, often due to existing comorbidities.

We need to work together to address these disparate health impacts. Our first step in protecting these communities is to use air quality monitors in each neighborhood to identify the pollutants of greatest concern. We cannot address the issue without assessing the problem, which is why we need a more robust air monitoring system across the country.

That is why, today, I'm proud to join Senator Duckworth and other House & Senate environmental justice leaders in reintroducing the *Public Health Air Quality Act*—and why I'm also proud to partner with Representatives Castor and Torres and Senator Markey on the *Environmental Justice Air Quality Monitoring Act*.

The *Public Health Air Quality Act* will better inform and protect communities by requiring EPA to enhance and expand its air quality monitoring network and will ensure that EPA has the resources they need to do it well.

And beyond collecting the data, this legislation will help the community access and understand the data.

All too often, the communities that live the closest to polluting facilities are the last to find out what toxic pollutants are in their air, and how these toxic pollutants impact their health. With the *Public Health Air Quality Act*, they'll now be one of the first to know.

From enhancing air monitoring systems at the highest-polluting facilities to supporting pilot programs for hyperlocal air monitoring projects in under-resourced communities and communities of color—we need to work together to expand our environmental protection infrastructure.

Too many communities throughout our country are living with that time bomb – wondering when, or if, their government will be there to protect the public. Well today, let's come together to say that we are here to give them the protection they deserve— we're here to hold polluters accountable, and here to make our communities safer and healthier.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.