

KAMALA D. HARRIS  
U.S. Senator for California



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## Climate Equity Act

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Avoiding the worst consequences of the climate crisis will require the United States to mobilize a full-scale and urgent effort in the form of a Green New Deal, which will end our reliance on fossil fuels and build a clean economy with millions of new jobs. Yet history has shown that such government efforts often leave behind vulnerable “frontline” communities who stand to disproportionately suffer the negative impacts of the crisis at hand. Even as the nation’s landmark environmental laws—from the *Clean Water Act* to the *Clean Air Act*—have transformed environmental conditions on the whole, they have failed to adequately protect frontline communities from polluted air, toxic water, and more.

As the United States combats climate change and confronts the challenges of the 21st century, U.S. Senator Kamala D. Harris (D-CA) and U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY-14) are announcing the *Climate Equity Act (CEA)* to ensure that frontline communities have a seat at the policymaking table and that nobody gets left behind. Frontline communities are those that have experienced systemic socioeconomic disparities, environmental racism, and other forms of injustice, including low-income communities, indigenous peoples, and communities of color. As the climate crisis continues, these communities and others, including deindustrialized communities, depopulated rural communities, vulnerable elderly populations, unhoused populations, and people with disabilities—and the women, youth, and future generations belonging to these communities—will be on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

We must hold the United States government accountable for ensuring that frontline communities are at the heart of the decision-making process whenever it considers a policy, regulation, or rule with a climate or environmental nexus—which could broadly include direct policies to address the environment and climate change, but also transportation, housing, infrastructure, jobs, workforce development, and more. That is why legislation is needed to:

### Hold Congress Accountable

- Require that environmental and climate-related legislation receive an equity score that will transparently estimate the impact on frontline communities.
  - The equity score will be modeled after the economic scores provided by the Congressional Budget Office, will be developed in consultation with experts and leaders from frontline communities, and will be updated periodically.

### Hold the Executive Branch Accountable

- Require that environmental and climate-related rules and regulations that have significant impact on frontline communities undergo an additional level of review. This review will aim to mitigate negative impacts, maximize benefits, and bring representatives from frontline communities into the regulatory review process.
- Require that environmental and climate-related federal grant-making and investment programs undergo review to ensure that frontline communities benefit.

## Give Advocates a Seat at the Table

- Establish an independent Office of Climate and Environmental Justice Accountability to represent the views of frontline communities in rulemaking by bringing those communities into the rulemaking process, conduct research on issues and trends in frontline communities, measure the costs of regulations on frontline communities, and monitor government compliance.
- Establish a new position of Senior Advisor for Climate and Environmental Justice at all relevant agencies to ensure compliance and coordination between the relevant agency and the Office of Climate and Environmental Justice Accountability.
- Ensure that representatives of frontline communities are at the table during the review of rules and regulations, providing insights and comments on how to minimize negative impacts and maximize benefits of rules and regulations on frontline communities.

From the toxic air embattling Cancer Alley in Louisiana and Asthma Alley in the Bronx to the unsafe drinking water in California's San Joaquin Valley and Flint, Michigan, the nation's bedrock environmental protections have not stopped frontline communities from continually falling through the cracks. Climate change will only exacerbate environmental injustice for these communities, who have historically faced a broad set of economic and historic injustices. For example, climate change threatens to:

- Stress already deteriorating water and transportation infrastructure.
- Undermine the health and safety of frontline communities who already lack access to quality and affordable health care.
- Threaten lives in heatwaves and other deadly climate events, resulting in increased need for expensive resources like air conditioning and resilient housing.
- Force families to empty their savings accounts to move away from areas prone to disasters—or not move away at all and face life threatening climate impacts.

Given the systemic disadvantages that frontline communities already face, any climate plan must work to redress these ongoing injustices. A Green New Deal must not repeat the mistakes of past policies like the New Deal, which took transformative steps to revitalize the economy and expand the social safety net but also excluded people of color—particularly Black Americans—from enjoying its full benefits. Whereas the New Deal, for instance, exempted many Black Americans from Social Security and banned them from receiving high-level jobs created by the Tennessee Valley Authority, we must ensure that our policies to build our clean economy will uplift frontline communities, putting them at the center of a Green New Deal.

**Because the *Climate Equity Act* aims to center accountability and equity impacts in federal climate and environmental action, frontline leaders from the most impacted communities should, and will, have a seat at the table in formulating the CEA itself. Before its formal introduction this fall, advocates from frontline communities and their allies will have an opportunity to provide public feedback on this draft legislation to ensure that together we build the strongest policy possible.**

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Harris has emphasized climate and environmental justice throughout her career. As San Francisco District Attorney, she established an environmental justice unit to help the city's most vulnerable communities. As a United States Senator, Harris has designed legislation with equity for frontline communities in mind. For example, her *Water Justice Act* contains provisions to improve the safety and affordability of drinking water specifically for low-income and environmentally at-risk communities. Further, her *Clean School Bus Act* would electrify the nation's school bus fleet, targeting federal investments to millions of students from low-income communities who breathe polluted air every day during their commute to school.