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Environmental Justice Knocks Loudly at the White House

Veteran activists rearrange the agenda by explaining they wanted government officials in the lineup to do more listening and less talking

By Elizabeth McGowan

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WASHINGTON—It might have been the inaugural environmental justice forum at the White House. But that doesn't mean there were a bunch of rookies in the room.

The all-day gathering was barely under way when veteran activists of the movement partially rearranged the Wednesday agenda after they explained emphatically that they wanted federal government officials in the lineup to do more listening and less talking.

Once that was settled, much of the "us vs. them" tension in the room dissipated but didn't disappear. Advocates from some of America's most impoverished neighborhoods—where the underbelly of the country's industrial grind has turned the simple acts of breathing the air or drinking a glass of water into risky and deadly propositions—pleaded passionately and poignantly for substance over symbolism.

In return, federal government officials asked for patience and understanding. They are aware environmental justice hasn't exactly rocketed forward on a steady trajectory since President Bill Clinton signed an executive order in 1994 directing federal agencies to pay specific attention to glaring inequalities.

Even though the inner workings of the nation's capital might seem ritualistic, irrelevant and sloth-like on the surface, many explained, the fact that six cabinet heads—Department of Energy Secretary Steven Chu missed out due to illness—spoke at the Dec. 15 forum is an indicator that environmental justice is an enormous priority for President Obama.

For instance, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Justice collaborate on these issues all of the time, explained assistant attorney general Ignacia Moreno with DOJ's Environment and Natural Resources Division, and Cynthia Giles, assistant administrator with EPA's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance.

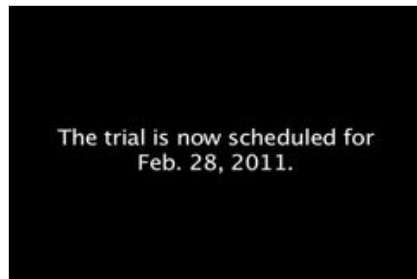
"I am going to ask for some partnership and some patience," Moreno told the doubters. "You're right, we have to get there. You want to see results on the ground. It will take some time to turn that big vessel. This administration is on it when it comes to environmental justice. We need to figure out how we set priorities together."

Feds Not Always at Fault

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson and Nancy Sutley, chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, organized the forum to revolve around four major topics: "Green Jobs, Clean Energy," "Legal Framework for Advancing Environmental Justice," "Healthy Communities and Place-Based Initiatives" and "Climate Adaptation."

In typical Washington fashion, each session was designed to begin with brief remarks from a cabinet secretary. That was followed by commentary and insights from six panelists from the public and private sectors. Then, the floor opened to questions from the 150 or so in the audience.

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That format fired up Texan Suzie Canales, an activist from Corpus Christi, who interrupted the proceedings to vent about what she called the disconnect between Washington and communities nationwide plagued with off-the-charts statistics of heart disease, cancer, lead poisoning, asthma and other respiratory diseases.

The downtrodden, she explained, don't need more "bureaucratic words on paper" or "another roadmap about environmental justice." Instead, they need relief from their stressful living conditions.

Canales's outburst prompted organizers to flip the order of the ensuing sessions so audience members gained more time for questions.

Though plenty of other attendees joined Canales in pointing their fingers at the federal government, they admitted that much of their frustration stems from inaction on the part of state and local agencies. Nothing will change, they claim, unless federal authorities wield a heavier hammer.

"We don't mean to be disrespectful," said advocate Vernice Miller-Travis, adding that there's a gigantic disconnect because local and state agencies fall far short of matching the federal commitment to environmental justice. "If it doesn't happen on the ground, it isn't going to happen."

Miller-Travis is vice chair of the Maryland Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities. She introduced Labor Secretary Hilda Solis at the forum.

Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition in San Diego put it this way: "Environmental justice cannot be achieved in silos. That's why we need these agencies. We need a comprehensive approach to build quality, healthy communities for all of us."

Progress Doesn't Mean Perfection

"It's changing in Washington, D.C. but it hasn't trickled down," said audience member Teri Blanton of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth.

In making a plaintive plea for the Department of Justice to intervene, she explained that her advocacy organization had uncovered 20,000 Clean Water Act violations in her home state after combing through discharge monitoring reports from three coal companies.

"The feds are trying to help," she told SolveClimate News in an interview, answering "hell, yes" when asked if she's noticed progress under the Obama administration. "They know what we're up against in our state. We are ground zero for energy issues. They need to take this into the field and make sure everyone is playing from the same playbook."

Blanton, sporting a colorful "I Love Mountains" pin said she trekked to the nation's capital because somebody has to be relentless when unsustainable practices by coal companies are flooding residents of Appalachia out of their homes.

"My people are suffering every day because they don't have a clean drink of water and have to breathe in dust," said Blanton, who was appointed to the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council this year.

The last time she traveled to Washington, in September, she was arrested for protesting with the advocacy group Appalachia Rising in front of the White House.

Blanton said she was elated that her fellow activist Canales piped up early on and triggered a change on the forum format because "I didn't give up three days of my December to only listen."

Canales told SolveClimate News her criticisms led to a short one-on-one meeting with Jackson of the EPA. While the co-founder of Citizens for Environmental Justice said she is grateful she shook things up, she won't rest until vulnerable Corpus Christi residents are relieved of the hazards from industrial pollution emitted by a 10-mile stretch called "Refinery Row."

"Our biggest obstacle is government," Canales said. "What needs to happen is we need to make a priority of people who are in imminent danger."

Recent Efforts in Jeopardy?

Panel moderator Cecil Corbin-Mark, deputy director of New York City's WE ACT for Environmental Justice characterized the President Obama-activist relationship this way: "We have your back but we will pull your tail."

Fellow New Yorker and panelist Eddie Bautista, executive director of the Environmental Justice Alliance, lauded the Obama administration for "shifting the Titanic" with a noticeably invigorated approach to environmental justice.

NASA: Eyes on the Earth
National Climatic Data Center
National Snow and Ice Data Center
National Science Foundation
NOAA Climate Service
NOAA Paleoclimatology
EPA's Climate Change Page
Global Change Research Program
Goddard Institute for Space Studies
Navy Task Force on Climate Change
USDA Climate Change Research Ctr
US Forest Service Publications
DOE: Office of Climate Change Policy

International

Intergov'tal Panel on Climate Change
UN Framework Convention (UNFCCC)
UN Environment Programme (UNEP)
Met Office: Hadley Centre (UK)
UK Gov't Climate Change Page

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However, he also warned the audience about an upcoming change that he figured federal government employees couldn't discuss in such a forum. When the 112th Congress convenes in January with a Republican-majority House, some legislators will likely question every penny being directed toward this resurgent environmental effort.

"A lot of these initiatives are threatening to be stillborn," he concluded. "Already, the attack is coming."

(Official White House Photo by Samantha Appleton)

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