



***Second National People of Color Environmental  
Leadership Summit - Summit II***

**Resource Paper Series  
October 23, 2002**

**Power Plant Pollution, Public Policy and People of Color  
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Disclaimer: The Summit II Resource Paper Series was commissioned and assembled by the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University with funding support from the Ford Foundation, Turner Foundation, Public Welfare Foundation, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences, U.S. Department of Energy, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The opinions expressed in this commissioned paper represent those of the author(s) and not those of the commissioning institutions or the funding agencies.

# **Power Plant Pollution, Public Policy and People of Color**

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## **Abstract**

The author will focus on power plant pollution and the impact upon African Americans based upon a new report *Air of Injustice* jointly released by the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, Clear the Air, the Black Leadership Forum and the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda. The author examines the strategies employed by the Airkeeper Campaign, a local organizing arm of the national Clear the Air Campaign and the Georgia Environmental Enforcement Project, a model coalition that involves environmental justice, civil rights and mainstream environmental groups in an effective effort to inspire state enforcement action. .

When the Clean Air Act was passed Congress made special allowances for existing coal fired power plants with the expectation that these older plants would be retired. A huge loophole was created making it economically advantageous to repair and upgrade older plants extending the life of the plant well into the future. These plants emit up to ten times the pollution of modern plants. Mainstream environmental groups concerned with air quality such as the Clean Air Task Force, Clear the Air and the National Environmental Trust have joined in an effort to advance national legislation that will close the loophole in the Clean Air Act and require all coal fire power plants to meet modern emission standards.

This paper will focus on power plant pollution and the impact upon African Americans based upon a new report *Air of Injustice* jointly released by the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, Clear the Air, the Black Leadership Forum and the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda. It will examine the strategies employed by the Airkeeper Campaign, a local organizing arm of the national Clear the Air Campaign and the Georgia Environmental Enforcement Project, a model coalition that involves environmental justice, civil rights and mainstream environmental groups in an effective effort to inspire state enforcement action. The objective of this paper is to highlight opportunities for collaboration and advancement of environmental agendas.

## **Air of Injustice**

More than 75% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a power plant and more than 70% live in areas that violate national air quality standards. The adverse health affects of air pollution are well documented and directly linked to asthma and other respiratory illness. Asthma rates for African Americans are as much as three times the general population with poor access to health care, exposure to air pollution and poverty sited as contributing factors. Despite the disproportionate impact of air pollution on African Americans, this community has not been engaged at the policy level in addressing air quality. With a few exceptions the environmental justice community has been conspicuously absent within the debate over policies impacting pollution from coal fired power plants.

To their credit, the environmental justice community has mobilized to respond to justice issues related to climate change. Power plants are the biggest industrial source of pollution contributing 38% of all carbon dioxide, the most significant greenhouse gas, emitted from burning fossil fuels in the United States placing power plants at the center of the debate on climate change. African Americans and other People of Color are least likely to be prepared to respond to the impacts of climate change such as extreme weather, the spread of infectious disease such as West Nile virus and serious economic and social challenges. Moreover, energy is the most critical issue impacting quality of life globally. African Americans and all People of Color must engage in the global dialogue to establish a secure and sustainable energy future. This is particularly true when our community suffers the ill effects of current public policies.

## **Health Impacts of Power Plant Pollution**

Power plants are major contributors to the most common and harmful air pollutants including sulfur dioxide, particulate matter, nitrogen oxides and mercury. Sulfur dioxide is a strong respiratory irritant that causes coughing and wheezing and may contribute to asthma. Fine particles inhaled deep within the lungs have been associated with premature death, sudden infant death and asthma. Nitrogen oxides have been found to change lung function and increase respiratory disease in children. Mercury has been linked to developmental defects and neurological disorders in fetuses, infants and children. Overall, power plant pollutants are most harmful to children, the elderly and those suffering from respiratory illness.

In addition to devastating health impacts, power plant pollution also has significant environmental impacts such as acid rain, ozone smog and haze impacting national parks, lakes and streams and all of creation through climate change.

### **The role of the federal government and the role of the states**

Although the 1990 Clean Air Act is a federal law covering the entire country, the states do much of the work to carry out the Act. For example, a state air pollution agency holds a hearing on a permit application by a power or chemical plant or fines a company for violating air pollution limits. Under this law, EPA sets limits on how much of a pollutant can be in the air anywhere in the United States. This ensures that all Americans have the same basic health and environmental protections. The law allows individual states to have stronger pollution controls, but states are not allowed to have weaker pollution controls than those set for the whole country. The law recognizes that it makes sense for states to take the lead in carrying out the Clean Air Act, because pollution control problems often require special understanding of local industries, geography, housing patterns, etc. The United States government, through EPA, assists the states by providing scientific research, expert studies, engineering designs and money to support clean air programs.<sup>1</sup>

For over thirty years the oldest, dirtiest coal-burning power plants have circumvented the most protective air emissions standards required of modern plants. As a result, these so-called “grandfathered” power plants are permitted to emit as much as 10 times more nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide than modern coal plants. Polluting coal-fired power plants must be made to comply with modern emissions control standards. In addition, the nation’s power fleet should be held to stringent caps on all four of the key power plant pollutants including nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, mercury and carbon dioxide. The deaths, hospitalizations and lost work time caused by fine particles from power plants can be reduced comprehensively only when the Clean Air Act’s 30-year loophole for old, dirty power plants is finally closed. Requirements such as these can ensure that U.S. energy policy better accounts for the public health and environmental costs associated with electricity production and will propel us toward a more sustainable energy future that relies increasingly on renewable energy resources and conservation.<sup>2</sup>

Under the Clean Air Act there is a provision known as New Source Review that requires older power plants that make major modifications leading to increased air emissions to install modern pollution control technology. This provision has been under attack by industry in an ongoing effort to circumvent the intent of Congress. The Bush Administration’s Clear Skies Initiative would delay power plant emission reductions as long as a decade and essentially guts the New Source Review provisions.

### **Airkeeper Case Study/GEEP Model Collaboration**

Mainstream environmental organizations tend to alienate talented professionals that possess an understanding of and allegiance to Communities of Color. While this is not an overt form of racism, it certainly permeates the entire field resulting in an inhospitable work environment. There is no effort to recruit or engage non-white professionals leaving the national mainstream environmental network virtually all white.

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<sup>1</sup> EPA

<sup>2</sup> Death, Disease and Dirty Power

In the few instances where people of color engage with the mainstream network there is an intense pressure to represent the environmental justice perspective. Clearly issues pertaining to race and ethnicity are only addressed at the prodding of these token representatives. At the local level, there is a distinct and obvious resistance to non-white leadership. Actions and accomplishments that are applauded for mainstream organizers are routinely criticized and analyzed when attributed to others, a familiar double standard.

The following assessment of the Georgia Airkeeper Campaign management is provided to offer insights into the organizational challenges inherent in bridging mainstream and environmental justice agendas.

In the spring of 2000, a black professional with extensive civil rights experience was hired to coordinate the Georgia Airkeeper campaign. The Airkeeper coalition consisted of four member groups who received funding to participate in the campaign. Members included Georgians for Clean Energy, Georgia Public Interest Research Group, Southern Organizing Committee and Physicians for Social Responsibility. Ozone Action, a progressive cutting edge environmental group focused on climate change was responsible for campaign management.

Advancing climate issues within the 4-pollutant campaign and outreach to the African American community were high priorities along with a sustained media presence on air quality issues. The director secured additional funding, hired and trained two young white female professionals and successfully engaged all coalition members. Additionally, strong relationships were cultivated with civil rights organizations and black political leaders. As this work moved forward there was constant agitation from one group that consistently challenged the new leadership. National and regional leadership was responsive to this agitation and seldom supported or reinforced the existing staff. The result was an constant criticism of “communication” that demoralized the Airkeeper team.

Ultimately the Airkeeper office was dismantled with coalition leadership shifted from the black professional to the agitating white professional. The reorganization displaced those associated with the office and there was no consideration given to transitioning the existing staff beyond the director. Prior to the reorganization there was constant scrutiny from the national level even though the office was productive and successful in advancing the national agenda. There was also an intense effort to separate work into discrete areas such as New Source Review, Climate Change or the 4-Pollutant national campaign. Invariably these efforts remain inextricably linked. Advancement in any one area tends to support and reinforce the others. Since the reorganization there has been no discernable or comparable scrutiny and those formerly associated with the Airkeeper office continue to advance the air agenda in Georgia fully integrating the environmental justice perspective within the Georgia Environmental Enforcement Project which was a spin-off from the Airkeeper campaign.

The Georgia Environmental Enforcement Project, an initiative funded by the Rockefeller Family Fund to persuade the State Environmental Protection Division to use delegated authority to mandate compliance with New Source Review. The project represents a creative departure from traditional mainstream campaigns resulting in a highly effective hybrid that generates results including extensive media coverage, significant community support and a diverse coalition. The project is distinguished by a healthy respect for the political strength of the African American community in Georgia and an open exchange that incorporates feedback from all parties.

The following excerpt from the GEEP web site captures the project launch and initial activities. In less than two years the project has become one of the most significant air quality enforcement initiatives in the state of Georgia.

### **Georgia Environmental Enforcement Project**

“Improving Georgia’s Air Quality One Power Plant Permit at a Time”

#### **Project Mission**

The Georgia Environmental Enforcement Project is a statewide coalition of advocacy groups committed to fighting for clean air, clean water, environmental justice, and responsible community

planning.

We come together to demand the clean up of power plants in Georgia.

**June 12, 2001**

"Permit to Pollute" is released, detailing the deficiencies in Georgia's Title V permitting program. In conjunction, a paid media campaign is unveiled, calling on Governor Barnes to enforce clean air laws.

**April 3, 2001**

Macon's Town Meeting and Community Dinner draws a crowd approaching 100 to discuss local air quality and call on Governor Barnes to revise the permits and improve GA EPD's permitting branch.

**March 12, 2001**

Comments detailing the deficiencies of Georgia's Title V Permitting Program were submitted to US EPA. A letter of concern was sent from the office of Rep. Cynthia McKinney.

**December 2000**

Letters of support were sent from the offices of Rep. Cynthia McKinney, State Reps. Tyrone Brooks and Bob Holmes. Over 20 environmental and public health groups signed on to coalition letters of support. The office of Rep. John Lewis voiced support in phone call to US EPA.

**November 15, 2000**

We filed a petition with US Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) to re-open the operating permits for Plant Bowen in Cartersville, Plant Scherer in Macon, and Plant Kraft in Savannah. We request public hearings in the three affected cities to voice citizen concern.

**Georgia's air pollution knows no city limits.**

In July, Governor Barnes reported that air quality in Macon, Columbus and Augusta violates national health standards.

On August 17, state air quality monitors detected the worst pollution levels ever for Georgia. On that date, violations of the health standard were detected all over the state, including Augusta, Macon, Columbus, Fort Mountain (North Georgia), and Leslie (Deep South Georgia).

**Air pollution can make you sick.**

Power plant pollution makes respiratory diseases, like asthma and bronchitis, more severe and life-threatening. Over 30 medical studies link pollution from coal-fired power plants to lung cancer.

Children and the elderly suffer the most from coal plant pollution. When air pollution is high, they battle asthma attacks more frequently and are much more likely to be admitted to the emergency room.

More than 1,600 lives in Georgia are shortened--several months to even years--by pollution from coal-fired power plants.

**Why are Georgia's coal-fired plants so dirty?**

Coal is the dirtiest fossil fuel we burn for energy production. Chemicals from the coal escape from the power plants into the air, making it unhealthy to breathe.

The Clean Air Act exempts 11 older coal-fired power plants in Georgia from meeting modern pollution standards--unless they make major modifications to their facilities.

**What can we do about it?**

Last year, US EPA filed suit against these plants for making modifications to their operations without updating their pollution control equipment, as mandated by the federal Clean Air Act (CAA). This lawsuit is buried in paperwork.

After this suit was filed, the State of Georgia (GA EPD) issued operating permits for these plants that are defective because they do not require modern pollution control equipment.

We are asking US EPA to reopen and revise the permits for Plants Bowen, Scherer and Kraft. This will reduce pollution and protect our health. Since the permits issued by GA EPD for these three plants do not have compliance schedules in them, these permits as they now stand are defective and need to be reopened by US EPA and revised.

GEEP lead coalition members include the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda, Southern Organizing Committee, Georgia Public Interest Research Group and most recently the Georgia Sierra Club. Unlike the Airkeeper Campaign, groups were not paid to participate, instead, resources were provided to support the work and the work was organized in such a way as to advance the interests of all partners. Together the

groups developed a strategy that resulted in statewide public hearings on power plant pollution conducted by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division at the request of the Department of Natural Resources Board, a meeting with Georgia Governor Roy Barnes, favorable media coverage and broad community support. Recently the Airkeeper management has sought to collaborate with GEEP. The overlap among member groups should be noted. All GEEP members were/are Airkeeper members.

**Georgia PIRG**

A non-profit, non-partisan consumer and environmental advocacy organization with over 3,000 members in Georgia.

**Southern Organizing Committee (SOC)**

A South-wide, multi-issue, multi-racial network of people working in communities against racism, economic injustice and environmental destruction.

**Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda**

Advocates for environmental justice, public policy and participatory government, with over 250 members across the State of Georgia

**Other Petitioners Include:**

**The Coosa River Basin Initiative**

A non-profit corporation committed to informing and empowering people to become active in creating a cleaner, healthier and economically viable Coosa River Basin.

**CAUTION Macon**

A citizen's advocacy group promoting responsible road building in Macon's neighborhoods and adequate planning to enable profitable "smart growth," while protecting residential property values, local business interests and quality-of-life.

**Citizens for Clean Air and Water**

A non-profit corporation that works on air quality and water quality issues affecting the greater Savannah area.

**Center for a Sustainable Coast**

A non-profit membership organization dedicated to supporting and enhancing the responsible use, protection, and stewardship of coastal Georgia's natural, economic, and cultural resources.

**Citizens for Environmental Justice**

Works to increase the participation of African American citizens in the work for a safe, clean environment.

**Others who have voiced support in letters and phone calls:**

Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney (4th District)  
Congressman John Lewis (5th District)  
National Wildlife Federation-Southeastern Natural Resource Center  
Sierra Club-GA Chapter  
League of Conservation Voters Education Fund  
The Wilderness Society-Southeast Regional Office  
Legal Environmental Assistance Foundation, Inc. (LEAF)  
Georgia Center for Law in the Public Interest  
20/20 Vision Georgia  
Georgia Legal Watch  
Environmental Action! (Columbus)  
Georgia Forest Watch  
Action for a Clean Environment  
Community Watershed Project (Athens)  
Georgia River Network  
Peachtree Woodall Whetstone Watershed Alliance

Little River Valley Association (Alpharetta)  
Chattoga Conservancy  
South River Watershed Alliance  
Chattahoochee Riverkeeper  
Altamaha Riverkeeper  
Hispanic Political Action Committee  
Southwest Economic Development Corp.  
Newtown Florist Club  
ZAP Asthma  
Physicians for Social Responsibility, Atlanta  
Black Men's Health Network  
Southside Asthma Clinic  
National Black Women's Health Project, Georgia Chapter

At the national level, the Rockefeller Family Fund provided legal and technical expertise and training, modest funding and coordination.

*DNR hears report on air quality meetings (Reprint from Macon Telegraph 9/26/02)*

*The environmental protection committee of the board governing the state Department of Natural Resources met Tuesday for a briefing on three public meetings held around the state on air quality and power-plant issues.*

*Ron Methier, chief of the air protection branch of the state Environmental Protection Division, reported that more than 500 people attended the meetings, including one held in Macon in May. Conservation groups had hoped the turnout would prompt the DNR to reconsider the permits of three Georgia Power plants, including Plant Scherer in Monroe County, but no action was taken.*

*Scherer is one of the largest coal-fired power plants in the nation. Such plants are a known source of ground-level ozone and particulate matter.*

[Print this letter](#)

**Sample letter for Gov. Barnes:**

Dear Governor Barnes,

I am a resident of **[your city/county]**, and I am very concerned about the air and water quality in my area. I am aware that coal-fired power plants, including Plants Bowen, Scherer and Kraft, contribute to air and water quality and health problems where I live.

Studies have shown that over 1600 lives in Georgia are cut short by power plant pollution each year. Power plant pollution has also been linked to asthma and other respiratory diseases, cardiovascular disease and some forms of cancer. **[Insert any personal experiences and problems that you believe may be linked to power plant pollution.]**

I have recently learned that the operating permits for Plants Bowen, Scherer and Kraft are allowing it to pollute the area at unlawful levels. Please revise the permits and stop them from poisoning my community.

Sincerely,

Contact form for Governor Barnes [http://www.ganet.org/governor/contact\\_form.html](http://www.ganet.org/governor/contact_form.html)

**Phone: 1-866-BARNES-5**

Mainstream organizations rely exclusively upon advice from a narrow range of consultants that lack knowledge of Black media or community outreach. GEEP incorporated media buys with the Black press, allocated resources for local organizing and, most significantly, cultivated real relationships with community leaders. As a result, communities all across the state turned out in large numbers to support the reopening of power plant permits for plants found to have violated the NSR provision and sued by the Federal Government under the Clinton Administration.

Although the suits in question are still ongoing, Bush Administration proposed changes would seriously undermine these court cases. In Georgia mainstream and environmental justice advocates collaborated in an effort to educate and engage the community. Such collaboration is required to pass national legislation that will close a 30-year-old loophole and mandate power plant clean up.

In an effort to close the power plant loophole, mainstream environmental groups support national legislation that will reduce emissions of the four major air pollutants: carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and mercury leading to significant improvements in air quality with significant public health benefits. The Senate Environment and Public Works committee narrowly approved a bill (S. 566) to slash most power plant emissions, including carbon dioxide. The legislation authored by Vermont Sen. Jim Jeffords (I), faces considerable opposition from industry the environmental justice community has the potential to mobilize the massive grassroots support needed to overcome the well financed industry lobby. The joint release of Air of Injustice in conjunction with the People of Color Summit II is the first major step in this direction.

### **EJ Organizing Implications**

Environmental justice initiatives attract a fraction of the resources allocated to mainstream campaigns. Mainstream organizes from the top down and EJ from the bottom up. When it comes to impacting public policy both strategies have been effective however, in order to expedite capacity building, the environmental justice community must look toward expanding and integrating scientific and policy expertise not typically found at the grassroots level.

### **EJ vs. Mainstream Work Styles**

Email—It has only been over the past year that community based organizations, particularly People of Color organizations, have become Internet and email savvy. Mainstream organizers have relied upon email communication for several years and have developed a degree of sophistication in utilizing the technology to support national campaigns. Most mainstream organizers could not imagine functioning without email and would become disconnected from their work in the absence of a dataport. Community based organizers spend a significant amount of time in direct conversations, seeking to build capacity and enable others to access information electronically. There is still a high dependence upon fax and phoning for communication even among those with access to email.

Media—Mainstream organizations have a strong tendency to equate media coverage with movement. Success is measured in inches of ink. EJ advocates measure success at the community level by change, education and organization, qualities much more difficult to measure. EJ organizations resist involvement in media campaigns.

Focus—Mainstream campaigns are so narrowly focused that it is difficult to gain broad support. On the other hand environmental justice by definition is burdened by an agenda so broad and comprehensive that initiatives are largely ineffective due to a lack of focus. EJ groups do not tend to mount campaigns focused on deliverables that can be measured by funders.

Resources—Mainstream campaigns are driven by funders and funding. Campaigns are narrowly focused with specific goals such as legislative “movement”, sign-ons or other specific objectives. These campaigns are not necessarily any more effective than grassroots efforts that receive little or no funding however, a sustained media presence secures ongoing support from funders. Environmental Justice organizations

receive small budgets to participate in mainstream campaigns and seldom attract the level of funding required to mount serious environmental justice campaigns.

### **Recommendations**

The Environmental Justice Community must:

- Demand that standards of diversity and equity are observed by mainstream environmental organizations.
- Participate in national policy debates impacting environmental agendas and proposed legislation.
- Bring together scientists interested in the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards upon People of Color.
- Educate mainstream environmental leadership, including funders, about environmental justice perspectives, agendas and organizations.
- Provide intensive training in media relations.
- Provide intensive training on utilizing digital technology.
- Create a centralized EJ Internet presence.
- Establish agreed upon principles for collaboration with mainstream organizations.

An ad hoc coalition of people of color advocates has called for a national study examining funding, hiring practices and contracting within the environmental movement.

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