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Who Loses if California's Climate Law is Halted?

No doubt you've heard the warnings -- the melting ice caps and rising sea levels, the extinct polar bears and extreme weather conditions. From pop culture movies like *The Day After Tomorrow*, to the tireless work of advocates like Al Gore, the discussion around climate change has often focused on environmental catastrophe and what the future may hold if humans don't change their carbon-emitting ways.

These are, of course, serious concerns and we need to address them to secure our planet's future. But what's been missing from the conversation is how climate change is affecting us here at the local level, in our communities, and that climate change policy -- done right -- could result in cleaner air for many American families today.

Last year, we released research about the "climate gap" -- the fact that people of color and the poor in the United States may suffer more from the economic and health consequences of climate change than other Americans. Our newest study, *Minding the Climate Gap: What's at Stake if California's Climate Law isn't Done Right and Right Away*, builds on that work to show that people of color and the poor have the most to lose if efforts to confront climate change are delayed. However, they also have the most to gain if we implement climate policies that deliver immediate public health benefits for everyone.

In California, for example, communities of color are more likely to live near major green house gas emitting facilities, such as refineries, power plants and cement kilns, which also spew toxic air pollution. This inequality in pollution emissions persists even after accounting for income differences across neighborhoods. In the case of particulate matter, which affects respiratory health, we find that, on average, communities of color face a pollution emission burden that is 70% higher than for whites. This trend makes clear that getting climate change policies right and right away is important for all of us but it's particularly essential for these overburdened communities.

What's astonishing is that despite the real threat that climate change poses -- and the immediate benefits from enacting climate change policy -- some politicians and big oil corporations are saying that we need to put the climate change law "on hold" in California. Whether or not millions of us will soon be breathing cleaner air may now hinge on a California ballot initiative, a statewide referendum that has once again become a proxy war for national policy debate.

Recent news has revealed that Texas oil companies Valero and Tesoro are major contributors to a campaign -- to the tune of \$600,000 -- to prevent implementation of California's climate law (known by its legislative name AB 32). These same companies are big contributors to air pollution. Our research indicates that all four of Valero and Tesoro's major refineries in California are major contributors to public health risks from air pollution. We also found that Valero and Tesoro's refineries are among the worst facilities in the state for disproportionately emitting pollutants in communities of color.

California's climate law was put into place years ago and now it's time to implement it. Allowing out-of-state oil companies to stop its implementation will not save jobs. Economic research on this issue shows that green job growth is a more likely result of climate policy and California is well-positioned for gains in that sector. If the oil companies win, it will just delay the immediate opportunity for cleaner air and better public health.

Implementing the climate law in the "right way" is also not that complicated. We suggest incentives should be structured to reduce greenhouse gases in neighborhoods suffering from the dirtiest air. Facilities responsible for the greatest estimated health impacts -- could be prohibited from paying a fee or trading emissions credits in lieu of cleaning up their operations. Revenues generated from polluter fees could also feed into a "Climate Gap Neighborhood Protection Fund" to improve air quality in these communities and enhance the ability of disadvantaged Californians to adapt to climate change impacts.

The enormous potential for cleaner air as a result of California's climate law hasn't even been a part of the debate yet, but last week a Field poll found that 58% of Californians support the policy. As more people realize that supporting smart climate policies will also give them cleaner air to breathe, that number could increase significantly. That's good news for those seeking to protect California's climate law and public health against the misguided anti-AB 32 campaign.

Whether the goal is protecting the environment or re-building America's workforce, preventing climate change is not just about reaping some future returns. Real climate solutions will give us cleaner air to breathe -- and this is an immediate benefit for everyone, especially for communities of color and the poor who are currently suffering from the dirtiest air.

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