

Climate Change: The Ultimate Threat to Environmental Justice

By Deb Markowitz, Secretary, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources

From the Birmingham Jail in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." And he observed that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Every year I appreciate how his words, spoken decades ago, bear relevance to the challenges we face today. Not only do we continue to grapple with both racial and financial discrimination and inequality, but we see the high standard of living enjoyed in some parts of the world resulting in devastating impacts across the globe.

This "inescapable network of mutuality" and issues of justice were front and center at the Paris Climate Summit I attended in December. Because of our reliance on fossil fuels to drive economic prosperity, developed countries are the largest contributors to greenhouse gas pollution. Yet the highest costs are being borne disproportionately by the poor and disadvantaged. Small, island countries and other vulnerable nations reminded all who participated in the Summit of the urgency to act and the need to make and keep specific emission-reduction commitments that help poorer countries experiencing catastrophic damage.

I returned from Paris feeling optimistic about the significant progress that the Climate Agreement represents. It is great news that the agreement unites 196 developed and developing countries behind the goal of keeping global temperature increase to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The agreement also acknowledges that to do this, global emissions will have to come down dramatically and reach net zero levels by the second half of the century. This is sure to drive investment away from fossil fuel based industries and spur new technological innovation.

In addition to promising to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, developed countries pledged \$19 billion to help developing countries adapt to effects of climate change. Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the United States will double its support of these efforts, increasing its contribution to \$800 million a year by 2020. This is a good step toward justice, although it will not be nearly enough to truly address the disparate impacts experienced by the poorer countries of the world.

Indeed, this is just the beginning. The Paris Climate Agreement will take effect only once it is ratified by member countries. Additionally, many operational details will be decided at future climate summits by leaders the world has yet to meet. But while we wait, I am ready for action. By speaking out on the need and ways to address climate change, Vermont is at the table with other governments, activists and business leaders from around the world who are taking real steps towards global change. Although the journey to equality and justice may be bumpy, Vermont is joining the march. And if Martin Luther King, Jr. was alive today, I am confident that he would be leading the way.