

Striving for a Livable Society and Planet

Nurturing and sustaining life is at the core of the environmental work going on in communities across the country. However, as the events of the past months have illustrated, if we are to ensure that our society and planet are sustainable, it will require the protection of those facing the greatest hazards and attention to the underlying disparities behind them.

Disproportionate Harm from Coronavirus

As the coronavirus hit, we quickly saw disparities in who is at highest risk of infection, not just in age groups, but along racial lines. In every state, we see that people of color suffer higher rates of infection, illness, and death than their percentage of the population. The reporting recognized that this is occurring because they are disproportionately “essential workers,” delivering essential services with daily exposure to the virus. They are among the lowest income workers in society and, as a result, have medical comorbidities that elevate risk factors, and are most likely to have limited, if any, health insurance. For millions of people outside the black and brown community, this has raised a heightened awareness of societal inequities along racial lines.

Black Lives Matter

Then, we all saw the horrific murder of George Floyd by the police, which sparked societal outrage, an outpouring of public support for Black Lives Matter, and calls for systemic change to combat systemic racism. That has brought our society to a transformational moment, building on a history of struggle to fight racial injustice, inequality, and environmental racism that is ingrained into our social and economic structure. History shows that there is opportunity in crisis. But defining the meaningful steps that are needed to address the foundational problems requires changes that take on vested economic interests, distribution of wealth, and remakes our social structure, reflected in a living wage, a stellar educational system, universal health care, and a rejection of attitudes that are embedded in our culture.

Call for Park Pesticide Ban Cites Environmental Racism

We started the year with a press conference in front of City Hall in New York City, calling for the passage of legislation to ban toxic pesticides in the city’s parks—part of a nationwide campaign we are spearheading. At that press conference in January, The Black Institute, flanked by the bill sponsors, Council Members Ben Kallos and Carlina Rivera, Beyond Pesticides, and others, spoke to the disproportionate harm from pesticide exposure to people of color using the New York City parks. As we report in this issue, *Poison Parks*, The Black Institute’s report released in January, finds, “In Manhattan, Harlem was disproportionately sprayed in comparison with the rest of

Manhattan.” The report points out that government regulation “has failed to address large-scale environmental practices, funded by big business, [that] disproportionately affect communities of color”—from fence-line communities near chemical production plants, farmworkers facing hazardous and inhumane working conditions in agricultural fields, landscape workers handling hazardous pesticides, to black and brown people, who suffer elevated risk factors that exacerbate pesticide hazards.

Eliminating Toxic Pesticides with Organic Transformation

This is not a time to tinker with reforms that don’t address foundational problems. The fact that racial disparities are integral to the way we regulate the production, transportation, use, and disposal of toxic pesticides and other chemicals means the toxic pesticide industry is unsustainable. The standards in the governing laws are fundamentally flawed, resulting in unnecessary use and unacceptable disease outcomes that are high generally, but even greater for people of color. Systemic change does not occur with improved “mitigation measures” that EPA manipulates unscientifically or the banning of some chemicals or some uses. Systemic change will come when we eliminate the chemicals and adopt organic management practices that offer safe jobs and truly sustainable practices.

Two recent examples. As a federal court decision banning three weed killer (dicamba) products was being announced last month, new formulations of dicamba and new genetically engineered herbicide-tolerant crops were being brought on to the market. As Bayer-Monsanto announced a \$10.9 billion settlement with victims of non-Hodgkin lymphoma to prevent further multi-multimillion dollar jury verdicts, it announced the continued sale of Roundup/glyphosate and declared the chemical’s safety while exclaiming their commitment to “sustainable agriculture.”

The next generation of hazardous pesticides are being developed for no other reason than the profits captured by multinational corporations and their shareholders. We have proven that we don’t need them. Meanwhile, the hazards associated with the toxic chemicals inflict disproportionate pain on people of color, with a constellation of more complex pesticidal effects every year, from multi-generational diseases like Diabetes, asthma and respiratory illness, and learning disabilities.

As we wrote in our statement of support for Black Lives Matter (see page 4), we strive for a sustainable world that, in a true sense, can only be achieved with foundational change to our social, economic, and environmental norms.

Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesticides

