



# 'YOU WILL SEE WHO GETS THE LIFEBOATS'

INJUSTICE ON THE FRONTLINES  
OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS IN THE US

**The Environmental Justice Foundation Charitable Trust is a UK registered charity that believes we all share a basic human right to a secure natural environment.**

EJF has teams based in Belgium, Germany, Ghana, Indonesia, Japan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Senegal and the UK. Our investigators, researchers, filmmakers and campaigners work with grassroots partners and environmental defenders across the globe.

Our work to secure environmental justice aims to protect our global climate, oceans, forests and wildlife and defend basic human rights.

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*All views expressed are those of EJF alone, and interviewees do not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.*



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS NOT ONLY AN ENVIRONMENTAL, ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC EMERGENCY: GLOBAL HEATING IS THE GREATEST THREAT TO HUMAN RIGHTS OF OUR TIME.

With a 1°C (1.8°F) increase, global heating is already acting as a threat multiplier, compounding existing economic, political, social and ecological stresses in marginalized communities across the world. What we are witnessing is a climate apartheid: those with historically the least responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions are paying the highest price for the wealthiest's addiction to carbon. The science is clear: the more our planet heats, the more we will experience devastation and, with it, violations of fundamental human rights. The climate crisis is a universal challenge, and we all have a common shared interest to act with far greater urgency and ambition now to avert the worst impacts of climate breakdown.

The US is historically the largest greenhouse gas emitter, responsible for almost 25% of historical emissions.<sup>1</sup> The US therefore bears the greatest burden for global emissions reductions and a responsibility to protect Least Developed Countries from the worst

impacts of global heating that will inevitably arise from the carbon already 'baked into' the global climate.

But climate justice is not just an issue between and across nation states. Climate injustice is rampant within the US as well. The Fourth National Climate Change Assessment recognized that global heating will disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color.<sup>2</sup> The truth is, these disparities are already being felt across multiple American communities on the frontline of the climate crisis.

It is critical to place justice at the heart of all climate action. We must make a holistic transition to a more sustainable future and a more just and equitable world for all. We must strive for a world where human rights are inviolable, marginalized voices are represented and incorporated into all levels of decision-making, and people everywhere have access to safe, healthy, and dignified livelihoods.

Climate action policy to mitigate and adapt to a heating planet must embody this justice-based approach. There will be a direct correlation between our ambition today and the lives lost or saved tomorrow.

**The stakes are too high to fail.**

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION CALLS ON THE US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO:

1. Substantially increase the ambition of American climate action today to save lives and protect communities, including taking a leadership role at COP 26 to ensure that the global recovery from Covid-19 is a just and green recovery for all.
2. Center racial, economic, and environmental justice as an organizing principle in all climate action.
3. Tackle the climate crisis as a cross-cutting human rights issue.





# INTRODUCTION

AS OUR PLANET CONTINUES  
TO HEAT, WE WILL SEE  
MORE FREQUENT AND MORE  
TERRIFYING EXTREMES  
OF HEAT, STORMS, AND  
DISASTERS EVERY YEAR.

# 'CLIMATE CHANGE IS ALREADY HAPPENING'

In December 2017, communities along the coast in Southern California watched as fire descended from the mountains, burning a swath of destruction through picturesque towns of hillside mansions and agricultural fields, down to the very shores of the Pacific Ocean. Thousands were forced to flee their homes, crowding into evacuation centers, staying with friends and family, or booking up almost every hotel room in the Central Coast. At the time, the Thomas Fire was the largest wildfire in California's recorded history, impacting all of the million people living in the affected counties. But as the fire raged, leaving a trail of burnt homes and businesses in its wake, in the ashes were laid bare the stark inequities of a divided community. While some received homeowner's insurance payouts, disaster relief, and unemployment compensation, others were left stranded, ineligible to receive government support, left in overcrowded homes with the power cut off, forced to work in dangerous conditions to support their families, unable to even read the safety notices and afraid to contact law enforcement for help.

The very next year, this 'once in a century disaster' was surpassed, by another, more terrifying wildfire. As our planet continues to heat, we will see more frequent and more terrifying extremes of heat, storm, and disasters every year.

The climate crisis is fundamentally a human rights crisis. Changes in climate will have different effects on different groups of people according to existing vulnerabilities.<sup>3</sup> The socioeconomic impacts of global heating will be nonlinear and are likely to have knock-on effects as physical hazards reach tipping

points beyond which physiological, human-made, and ecological systems break down.<sup>4</sup> The climate crisis will therefore not only act upon global inequalities - it will also exacerbate them, creating a vicious cycle where low-income and marginalized communities will be rendered increasingly vulnerable by global heating.<sup>5</sup>

In the US, vulnerability to global heating intersects with a matrix of systemic injustices: income inequality, racism, immigration status, gender, rural underdevelopment,<sup>6</sup> and a history of genocide of Native peoples. Studies have found that people of color across all regions and income levels in the US are systemically exposed to disproportionately higher levels of ambient air pollution.<sup>7</sup> Domestic climate action to urgently reduce emissions and adapt to the effects of global heating must also address these issues of justice, or they will fail to protect the American communities on the frontline of the climate crisis.

The American climate is already changing. In 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report stated with very high confidence that "many climate stresses that carry risk - particularly related to severe heat, heavy precipitation, and declining snowpack - will increase in frequency and/or severity in North America in the next decades."<sup>8</sup> Less than a decade on, we are already witnessing the truth of these predictions. The impacts of global heating are not limited to physiological and ecological risks: they permeate every aspect of human life, from our economies to our health.

As we see our climate changing today, it exacerbates the challenges and inequalities faced by American communities across the country. We must listen to their stories and engage them on solutions if we are to have a chance to stop the climate crisis and build a more just and sustainable future for all.

# DISPATCHES FROM THE FRONTLINES

## CURRENT ISSUES OF CLIMATE JUSTICE IN THE US

# TESTIMONIES

“ The climate crisis is absolutely a human rights issue. It’s certainly not just about saving polar bears. It’s about the smoke in your lungs when you’re working in the fields 10 hours a day picking strawberries and doing backbreaking manual labor, being put in danger not just from the environmental hazards that you’re facing, but also those connecting to centuries of racial and economic injustice. ”

LUCAS ZUCKER

“ When we talk about climate, we talk about housing. When we talk about climate, we talk about gentrification. We talk about food security. We talk about access to [affordable] clean and renewable energy. We talk about transportation...There’s a lot of intersectionality when we talk about climate. ”

JOANNE PERODIN

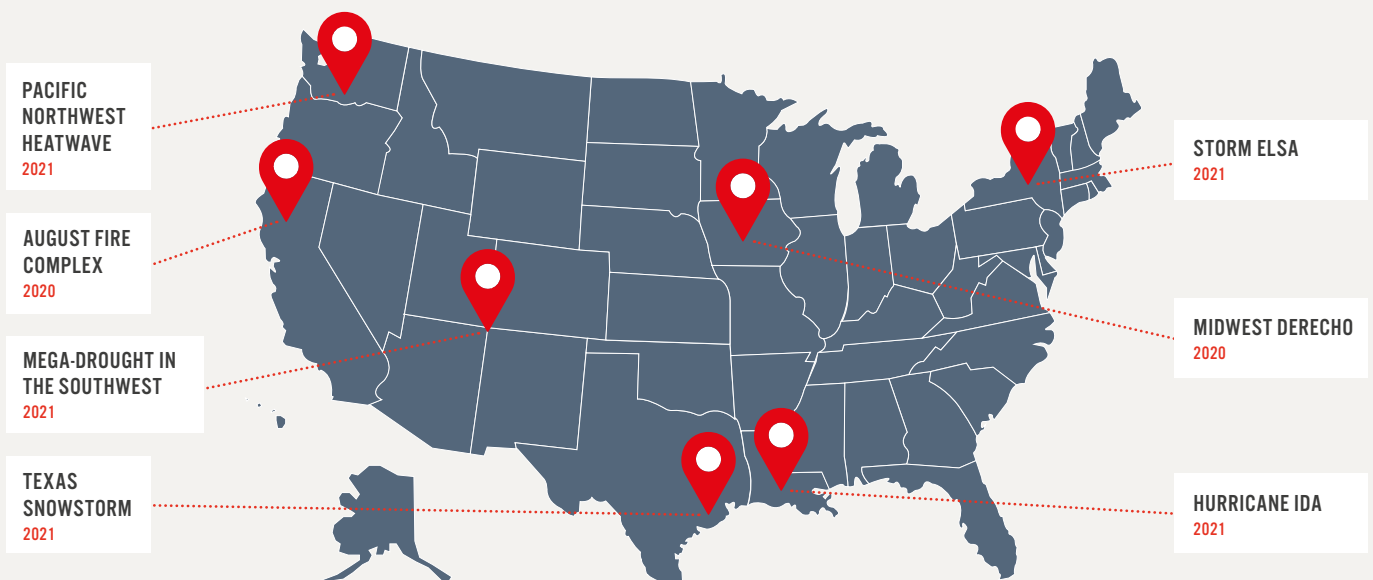
“ We have millions of people in the United States without status, who are systematically excluded from all kinds of benefits...who are simply being left out of support that we would say is a human right for all of our citizens... We’ve seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, we’ve seen during the wildfires that you can’t leave anybody behind, that the whole community is in danger when anybody is left [out]... We cannot sustain a system through any kind of crisis where 11 million people are left out of our social support. ”

LUCAS ZUCKER

“ Everyone has the right to have access to safe and affordable housing. Everyone has the right to be able to afford healthy food. No one [should] be placed in a position where they have to decide whether the money that they have should go towards paying their utility bills or buying groceries for a few days... unfortunately, a good portion of our population cannot even [afford to] prepare ahead of a hurricane. ”

JOANNE PERODIN

## THE US IS ALREADY EXPERIENCING THE CLIMATE CRISIS





“The more that immigrant communities are living in fear of their own government [because of] raids on communities, that makes it much more difficult for immigrant communities to be able to access the resources of government to protect against climate disasters. ... That really puts our communities so much more at risk from the health impacts of climate change, the economic impacts of climate change, the physical dangers, because of being systemically shut out of the systems that our government has created to protect people from the crises in their lives.”

LUCAS ZUCKER

“We are seeing the total lack of prioritization of communities that are never prioritized, that are always swept under the rug, whose struggles are always considered invisible. And this really comes to the surface during a disaster. It’s easy to ignore racial injustice in your society, but when the Titanic is going down, you see who gets the life boats.”

LUCAS ZUCKER

“We need “to make sure that those communities who have been marginalized have a seat at the table. ... [It means] creating a space so that those communities have the opportunity to have their voice heard when it comes to acknowledging the inequities that still exist in our society. [It means] as a collective com[ing] up with solutions that we can address those issues.”

JOANNE PERODIN

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**“WE HAVE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES WITHOUT STATUS, WHO ARE SYSTEMATICALLY EXCLUDED FROM ALL KINDS OF BENEFITS...”**

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LUCAS ZUCKER, CAUSE, JUNE 2021.

JOANNE PERODIN, MIAMI CLIMATE ALLIANCE, JUNE 2021.

MARGINALISED  
COMMUNITIES  
ARE  SWEPT   
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THE  
CLIMATE CRISIS  
× EXPOSES ×  
RACIAL INJUSTICE

... CANNOT  
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PREPARE FOR  
A HURRICANE



× WILDFIRES ×  
YOU CAN'T LEAVE  
ANYONE BEHIND

## ‘SMOKE IN THEIR LUNGS’

### California’s undocumented immigrant community on the frontlines of the climate crisis

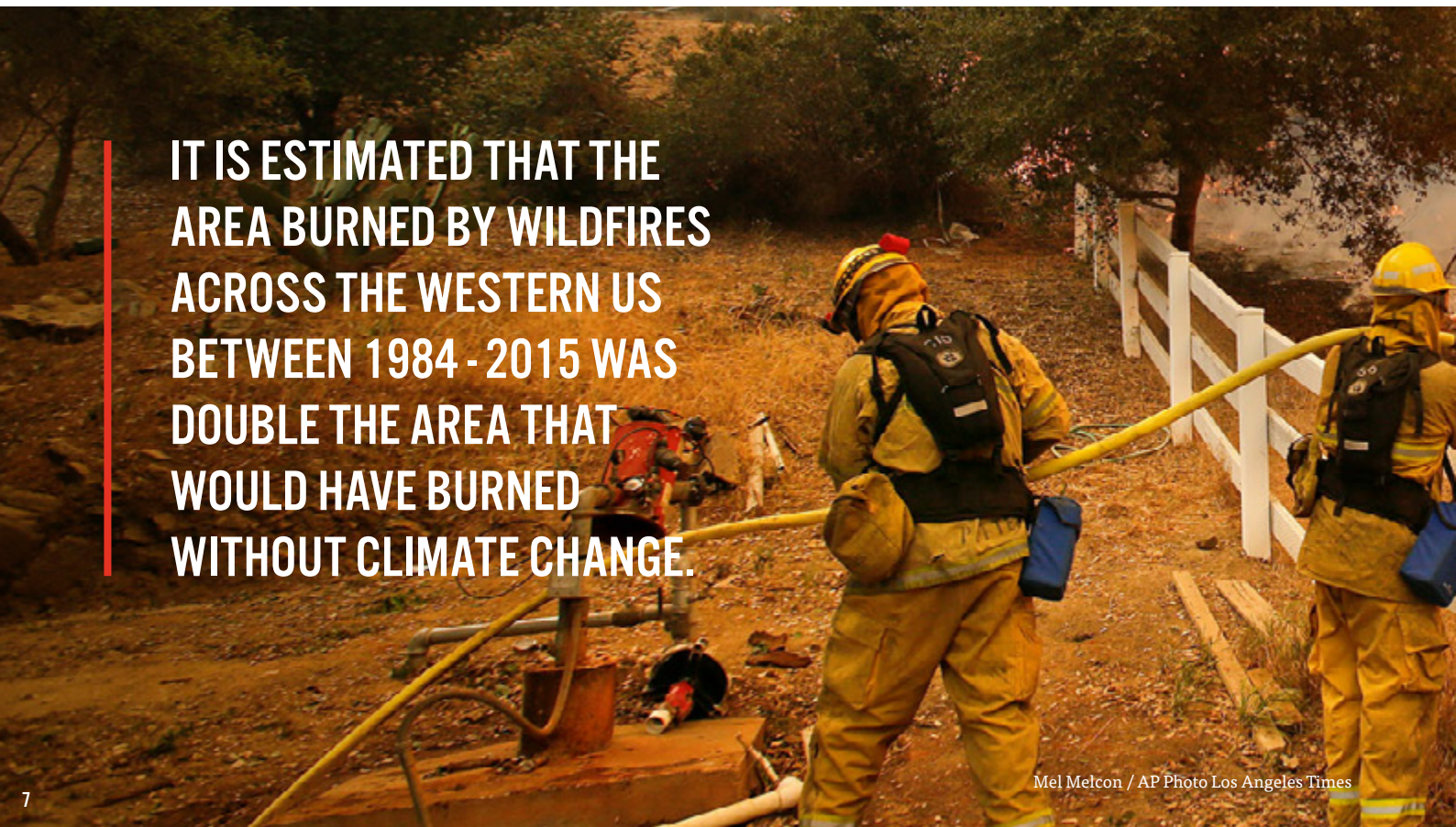
California has one of the hottest climates in the US, experiencing some of the highest temperatures recorded on Earth in Death Valley.<sup>9</sup> Global heating is causing significant changes to California’s climate. While temperatures are increasing across the entire Southwest, this is especially noticeable in southern California, where average temperatures have risen by 1.7°C (3°F) in the last century. Heatwaves, lack of rainfall and declining snowpack are increasingly common, threatening water supply across the region and contributing to longer and more severe droughts.<sup>10</sup>

Higher temperatures and drought have greatly increased wildfires in the Southwest region. It is estimated that the area burned by wildfires across the western US between 1984-2015 was nearly double the area that would have burned without climate change, burning an additional 4.2 million hectares.<sup>11</sup> Exacerbated by rising global temperatures, wildfires will become more frequent and more severe, having dire consequences for human health, property and livelihoods. More intense wildfires will not only pose dire security risks to local populations, but they will also cause significant landscape changes, expanding deserts and creating more arid conditions across the region.<sup>12</sup>

In 2018, nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants resided in the United States.<sup>13</sup> The highest number of these individuals – some 2.6 million in 2018<sup>14</sup> – live in California, making up over 6% of the state’s total population.<sup>15</sup> About 78% of California’s undocumented population comes from Mexico and Central America, with 64% originating from Mexico alone.<sup>16</sup> The vast majority of this number - around 77% of undocumented immigrants in California - speak Spanish at home.<sup>17</sup> While undocumented immigrant communities are spread across the entire state, their numbers are particularly high in major urban and agricultural areas.<sup>18</sup> In Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, undocumented immigrants make up at least 9% of the counties’ total populations.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the counties that host the largest populations of undocumented immigrants are also the ones feeling the impacts of global heating more acutely than the rest of the region: according to an analysis by the Washington Post, the average temperature in Santa Barbara County has warmed by 2.3°C (4.1°F) since 1895, and neighbouring Ventura County by 2.6°C (4.7°F), making it the fastest-warming county in the lower 48 states.<sup>20</sup> These counties are often also the ones most frequently devastated by wildfires.<sup>21</sup>

Global heating and drought are intensifying wildfires across California. When they occur, California’s undocumented immigrants are among the region’s most vulnerable populations to the wildfires’ impacts. This is because undocumented immigrants are generally excluded from government emergency response and

**IT IS ESTIMATED THAT THE AREA BURNED BY WILDFIRES ACROSS THE WESTERN US BETWEEN 1984 - 2015 WAS DOUBLE THE AREA THAT WOULD HAVE BURNED WITHOUT CLIMATE CHANGE.**



relief efforts. When disaster hits, the same government assistance available to California's documented residents is not available to its undocumented ones, precisely because of their immigration status. Undocumented communities are often also restricted by language and cultural barriers, which significantly limit their access to vital information in emergencies.<sup>22</sup>

The 2017 Thomas Fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties is a prime example of the exclusions and vulnerabilities that undocumented immigrant populations experience in the face of climate-induced disasters. At the time, the Thomas Fire was the largest fire in California since the state started keeping records in 1932, burning more than 280,000 acres, over a thousand homes and structures, and killing two people.<sup>23</sup> The Latino community, undocumented immigrants and low-income workers were all confronted with some of the worst challenges, both during and after the Thomas Fire. The ability of these communities to keep safe during the Thomas Fire was significantly limited, as warnings and information regarding evacuations, shelters, health, drinking water and other safety measures were initially only available in English.<sup>24,25</sup> Spanish translations were poorly accessible, despite Latinos making up between 43-46% of the affected counties' total populations,<sup>26</sup> and practically non-existent for the oral Indigenous languages which some undocumented immigrants speak.<sup>27</sup> Thousands of low-income immigrant farmworkers were at particular risk in the aftermath of the fires. Smoke polluted the air for weeks and was

especially hazardous to those who had to continue performing manual labor outdoors, who were often not provided protective equipment even as employers rushed their workers to work longer hours in dangerous conditions to salvage agricultural produce from the fire.<sup>28</sup> Excluded from federal emergency aid like FEMA and disaster unemployment assistance due to their immigration status, undocumented workers could not afford to stop working.<sup>29</sup> The unequal impacts of the Thomas Fire illustrates how climate vulnerability is exacerbated by other issues of justice including immigration status, and predicts how the escalation of the climate crisis will continue to harm first and worst the US' already marginalized communities who benefit the least from our carbon-heavy economies.



## ‘IT’S ALL DRIED OUT’

### Drought brings devastation to the Indigenous Southwest

The Southwest has one of the hottest and driest climates in the US, with parts of the region reaching the highest temperatures on Earth. With regional temperatures on the rise, permanent aridification in many parts of the Southwest poses a very real, urgent threat. Higher temperatures contribute to the already strained water supply in the region -- they increase evapotranspiration and reduce snowpack, affecting soil moisture and surface water availability. Severe droughts, such as the Colorado River Basin drought, significantly increase the risk of water shortages across the Southwest. Even without the the impacts of global heating, water demand in the region is already high, supplying growing cities, energy, and to a large extent, agriculture.<sup>30</sup> Agricultural irrigation is especially dependent on water supply in the region, making up about 75% of the water use.<sup>31</sup> Fueled by global heating, droughts in the region will become more frequent and more severe, and the likelihood of ‘megadroughts’ – dry periods lasting 10 or more years – will also increase.<sup>32</sup> Between 2000-2018, the Southwest experienced the second driest period since 800 CE, topped only by the late-1500s megadrought, according to a 2020 study of tree-ring samples to measure soil moisture.<sup>33</sup> Ben Cook, one of the authors of the study and a climate scientist at NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, addressed the megadrought phenomenon that is so peculiar to the Southwest region: “We know there were big droughts in the past that eclipse any of our contemporary experiences. There are very few places that have experienced megadroughts. I can’t think of any other region, at least in recent Earth history, that has ever experienced 20- to 50-year droughts [like the ones] that we have documented

in the Southwest.”<sup>34</sup> With global heating in the mix, the possibility of prolonged drought in the region increases.<sup>35</sup> Rural populations, including those in the Southwest, are more vulnerable to climate events due to their smaller labor markets, lower income levels and access to public services, and their higher dependence on agriculture, meaning that rural poverty may be exacerbated by changes in agricultural productivity,<sup>36</sup> creating a vicious reinforcing cycle of vulnerability.


Everyone, and especially Indigenous communities, will suffer from the impacts of the climate crisis in the Southwest. The Southwest is home to the largest population of Indigenous peoples in the US - approximately 1.5 million Native Americans.<sup>37,38</sup> Native Americans are one of the groups most vulnerable to the climate crisis in the US: already, Indigenous people have high rates of exposure and less adaptive capacity to the impacts of global heating because of historical and ongoing discrimination and socioeconomic exclusion.<sup>39</sup> Since the arrival of European colonists in North America, Indigenous communities in the Southwestern United States have had their traditional lands seized and been forcibly restricted to land with limited water and resources,<sup>40,41,42,43</sup> and continue to face challenges in accessing and enjoying their federally reserved water rights.<sup>44,45</sup> Global heating is magnifying this injustice: with intensifying drought depleting already limited resources and water on their lands, Indigenous peoples will continue to bear one of the heaviest burdens of the climate crisis in the Southwest.

The area where the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado meet is known as the Four Corners of the US Southwest, home to the ancient Anasazi (Ancestral Puebloans), Navajo, Hopi and Ute tribes. The Navajo Nation is the largest Native American reservation in the United States, covering over 27,000 square miles of land across Arizona, New Mexico and Utah.<sup>46</sup> Despite a heating climate, recurring drought and a changing landscape, more than 170,000 people



live on the reservation.<sup>47</sup> The Navajo people have strong ties to their traditional homeland and its surrounding mountains, which, though located outside the reservation, are sacred to the tribe and central to its identity.<sup>48</sup> Living conditions on the reservation are poor, with around 38% of residents lacking basic amenities including electricity and running water.<sup>49</sup> According to a 2000 Census (the only available data), about 43% of the Navajo Nation's population was living below the poverty rate in 1999.<sup>50</sup> Rising temperatures and increasing aridification are exacerbating these already unjust living conditions.<sup>51</sup> This is noticeable with the diminishing water supply and the movement of sand dunes in the area. Sand dunes, which cover a third of the Colorado Plateau, are reactivating, growing and spreading more rapidly into the tribal lands of the Navajo. In the southwestern part of the Navajo Nation, sand dunes are migrating at a rate of 115 feet per year.<sup>52</sup> Sand dune migration threatens not only the health, homes and essential infrastructure of Native populations,<sup>53</sup> but it also has the potential to significantly affect the landscape that is so crucial to the Navajo tribe's livelihoods, traditions and way of life.<sup>54</sup>

Surrounded by the Navajo Nation is the Hopi Reservation, covering over 1.5 million acres in northeastern Arizona.<sup>55</sup> Like everywhere else in the Four Corners, global heating is intensifying an already hot and dry climate on the reservation. The lack of rainfall and increasing aridity in the region is significantly affecting the Hopis' agricultural practices and traditions, particularly their ability to grow corn. For the Hopi, corn is not merely a source of food or income; it is a sacred crop and an essential part of the tribe's culture, religion and overall way of life.<sup>56</sup> Relying on a technique to retain soil moisture known as "dry farming", traditional Hopi farmers have historically been able to successfully grow their crops in the region's dry climate.<sup>57</sup> However, global heating poses a threat to even the most resilient agricultural practices, and the recurring drought and rising temperatures in the area are making it increasingly difficult for the Hopi to continue their traditional way of life. The example of the Hopi illustrates the ways in which the climate crisis presents a further attack on Native American rights by threatening ecosystems and biodiversity which play a central role in Indigenous livelihoods, cultures, histories, and traditions.<sup>58</sup>



"I can't think of any other region, at least in recent Earth history, that has ever experienced 20-50 year droughts [like the ones] that we have documented in the Southwest."

BEN COOK, CLIMATE SCIENTIST

## ‘PUSHED OUT OF HOME’

### The climate crisis and displacement on the Gulf Coast

The effects of global heating and sea level rise are already felt across the US Southeast, with extreme weather and coastal flooding growing more common and more intense. High tide coastal flooding poses a regular threat to neighborhoods, infrastructure and ecosystems in the region. Rising water levels and extreme weather events will continue to have a significant impact on living conditions and tourism in the region, especially in low-lying and coastal areas. In the foreseeable future, the Southeast can also expect higher temperatures, greater humidity and the spread of new diseases. Higher temperatures are already noticeable, as the region experiences more frequent and longer heatwaves. Exacerbated by global heating, the impacts of sea level rise, increasing precipitation, higher temperatures and extreme heat will only worsen, affecting all local populations, although not equally.<sup>59</sup>

In the Southeast, low-income communities of color are among the most vulnerable groups in the face of climate-induced disasters and environmental emergencies. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey demonstrated how the violent impacts of a changing climate were felt first and worst by communities of color along the Gulf Coast.<sup>60</sup> Most likely to reside in heavily polluted, underdeveloped neighborhoods, these communities are already exposed to many environmental hazards.<sup>61,62</sup> Studies have found that people of color across all regions and income levels in the US are systemically exposed to disproportionately higher levels of ambient air pollution.<sup>63</sup> Racial disparities and insecurities have long existed in the Gulf Coast, posing a daily threat to rural, low-income communities of color in the region, and are expected to continue as Gulf communities experience new, racially disproportionate challenges linked to global

heating. As the global climate crisis intensifies, so too will storms and floods in the region; however, unlike their wealthy neighbors, low-income communities will struggle to afford hurricane preparedness, are more likely to be renters and uninsured, and will not be able to move when their homes or possessions are destroyed.<sup>64</sup> The US’ disaster preparedness framework fails to adequately protect vulnerable communities from natural hazard risks: under the 2018 Disaster Recovery Reform Act, only 6% of disaster funding is allocated to pre-disaster mitigation.<sup>65</sup>

The devastating and disproportionate effects of Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, highlighted the social and racial inequalities that exist in the region, and which are further amplified in the wake of disaster. Katrina was one of the worst hurricanes to ever hit the US.<sup>66</sup> Overwhelming the area’s flood-protection system, the hurricane left 80% of New Orleans under water,<sup>67</sup> causing over 1,800 deaths and \$108 billion in damages.<sup>68</sup> The worst of these effects were felt by low-income Black communities living in impoverished neighborhoods, long neglected and underinvested in by local government.<sup>69</sup> Lacking proper maintenance, levees in these neighborhoods gave way and ultimately failed to protect the already vulnerable communities from the incoming floodwaters.<sup>70</sup> Due to racially discriminatory housing practices, most Black homeowners occupied low-lying, more exposed areas: Black residents were 1.5 times more likely to experience serious flooding compared to the city’s white residents.<sup>71</sup> It is estimated that in Orleans Parish, 73% of the black population was displaced by the storm, compared to 63% of the non-black population - also a high proportion, but a lower level of displacement than was experienced by the parish’s black community.<sup>72</sup>

Even before Katrina swept over the Gulf Coast, disaster preparedness in New Orleans was weak: many parts of the city that were essentially high-risk flood areas were not classified as floodplains by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).<sup>73</sup> As a result,



**A STUDY FOUND THAT  
NATURAL DISASTERS...  
WIDEN THE  
RACIAL WEALTH  
GAP IN THE US.**

many residents did not have flood insurance, and thus faced heavy financial burdens in the aftermath of the hurricane.<sup>74</sup> Recovery in post-Katrina New Orleans was no different; years after the hurricane hit, many Black neighborhoods are still far from rebuilt, while white neighborhoods thrive with new homes and businesses. Despite suffering some of the worst impacts of the hurricane, Black and minority neighborhoods in New Orleans received the least amount of funding, insufficient to properly rebuild after Katrina.<sup>75</sup> The severe effects of the hurricane, levee failure and flooding that desolated neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward, a predominantly Black neighborhood in New Orleans, are noticeable to this day, and are a vivid reminder that Katrina was far from an “equal opportunity storm.”<sup>76</sup> A study by Rice University and the University of Pittsburgh found that natural disasters widen the racial wealth gap: white individuals saw an increase in average wealth after natural disasters, whereas people of color saw lesser increases or a net decrease in household wealth after a natural disaster.<sup>77</sup> The results of this study suggest that the more FEMA aid is disbursed in an area, the more unequal wealth distribution is exacerbated across existing injustices, highlighting the need to integrate justice frameworks in disaster response.

The loss of wetlands along Louisiana’s Gulf Coast was an additional factor exacerbating the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina and other extreme weather events. As sea levels continue to rise, Louisiana grows smaller. Its wetlands are rapidly diminishing and with it the protection they provide against storms and floods.<sup>78</sup> To a large extent, the collapse of marshlands in the area can be attributed to oil and gas exploration, extensive drilling and canal-building on coastal lands.<sup>79</sup> The loss of these vital wetlands makes Gulf Coast populations increasingly vulnerable to the often catastrophic effects of global heating, highlighting the vicious cycle of ecosystem degradation, global heating, and community suffering caused by fossil fuel extraction industries.

Vulnerable communities in the Southeast of the US do not only suffer from the after effects of extreme weather aggravated by global heating: they also suffer preemptively in anticipation of climate change risks. One glaring example is the increase in climate gentrification, which occurs when minority and lower income communities are priced out of their historical neighborhoods. In Miami, developers are buying up property in the cheaper, higher elevation neighborhoods such as Liberty City, Little Cuba and Little Haiti as the fear of rising sea levels risks the property value of beachfront areas.<sup>80,81,82</sup> Climate gentrification increases housing insecurity and threatens livelihoods, and highlights the multilayered threats which global heating puts on frontline communities.



**“UNLESS ACTIONS ARE TAKEN  
IMMEDIATELY, EXISTING NDCS MAY LEAD  
TO A TEMPERATURE RISE OF ABOUT 2.7°C  
(4.9°F) BY THE END OF THE CENTURY.”**

UNFCCC






# A HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN THE MAKING

## WHAT UNCHECKED GLOBAL HEATING MEANS FOR PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

According to the UNFCCC's September 2021 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) Synthesis report, our current plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions still put our planet on a path to around 2.7°C (4.9°F) increase this century; but more ambitious emissions cuts within the next decade could avert this catastrophic scenario.<sup>83</sup> Science warns us that approaching 3°C of global heating could translate to an increase in the number of intense tropical storms like Hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, or Maria,<sup>84</sup> and a five-fold increase in average drought length from 1.5°C (2.7°F) projections and increased frequency of megadroughts in dry regions like the Southwest.<sup>85</sup> A model from the New York Times and ProPublica predicted that 30 million people would be forced to move to the US from Central America alone by 2030 under the highest heating scenario.<sup>86</sup> Health risks are likely to increase as global heating increases, including deaths from heat waves, extreme weather events, air pollution, and water, food, and vector-borne infectious diseases.<sup>87</sup> Health impacts, like the other impacts of the climate crisis, will vary by socioeconomic factors,<sup>88</sup> with vulnerable populations most at risk.

- **3°C (5.4°F)** INCREASES THE NUMBER OF INTENSE TROPICAL STORMS LIKE HURRICANE KATRINA
- A FIVE-FOLD INCREASE IN AVERAGE DROUGHT LENGTH FROM 1.5°C (2.7°F) PROJECTIONS
- INCREASED FREQUENCY OF MEGADROUGHTS IN DRY REGIONS LIKE THE SOUTHWEST.
- 30 MILLION VULNERABLE PEOPLE FORCED TO FLEE TO THE US FROM CENTRAL AMERICA BY 2030
- RISE IN DEATHS FROM HEAT WAVES, EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS, AIR POLLUTION, AND WATER, FOOD, AND VECTOR-BORNE INFECTIOUS DISEASES.



**WE SIMPLY CANNOT ALLOW GLOBAL HEATING TO REACH THESE LEVELS. WE MUST TAKE ACTION NOW TO MEET THE PARIS AGREEMENT TARGETS - FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION.**

# A LONG ROAD AHEAD

## AN ANALYSIS OF US CLIMATE POLICY



Lawrence Jackson / Official Whitehouse Photo

EJF welcomes the Biden administration's renewed commitment to climate action, as shown through the US rejoining the Paris Agreement and publishing an updated NDC, and President Biden's executive order on tackling climate change at home and abroad with its promise of a government-wide approach to tackling the climate crisis.<sup>89</sup> We also are encouraged by the administration's Build Back Better Plan and its commitment to integrating climate action as a critical part of building a new and more just American economy, including improving access to clean water, creating new jobs by investing in a renewable energy grid, and making American infrastructure more resilient to global heating. EJF particularly commends the renewed focus on justice as an organizing principle for climate action, with the government-wide Justice40 Initiative, the creation of the Environmental Justice Interagency Council and the federal government's commitment to substantive engagement with stakeholders including tribal governments who have historically been sidelined.

While this engagement represents a solid start for renewed US climate leadership, far greater ambition and action are needed. While President Biden's proposal of an NDC alone is cause for celebration, some action is not sufficient action. The goal of 50-52% reductions below 2005 levels still falls woefully short of the emissions reductions which science tells us are necessary to have any chance of staying below the Paris Agreement targets and averting climate catastrophe. We urgently need greater ambition in policies linking action on climate,

biodiversity conservation, and justice, developed through transparent and inclusive consultation with frontline communities. President Biden's Build Back Better Plan represents a first step towards real climate policy, and we cannot let a partisan political stalemate impede this critical legislative initiative towards a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

### **'A PATH TO BRING OUR PLANET BACK INTO BALANCE': A NEW AMERICAN DREAM FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET**

Action today on climate will save lives and money; the longer we wait, the higher the cost to life and to our economies. Global heating is already a significant cost to our economy. In 2020, climate-related natural disasters cost an estimated \$95 billion in damages in the US alone.<sup>90</sup> To avoid catastrophic damages, countries are having to invest heavily in adaptation and protection from the climate crisis. Without a rapid and just green transition, our heating climate will cause devastation that will drain government treasuries and drag huge swaths of the population into poverty. In the US, economic damage from global heating is estimated to average "roughly 1.2% cost of GDP per year per 1°C (1.8°F) increase" under a high emissions scenario (RCP 8.5).<sup>91</sup> We must reject the idea that climate action is a cost to be borne. In reality, action now to mitigate and adapt to global heating will be the biggest cost saving of all time.



**WE MUST REJECT THE  
IDEA THAT CLIMATE  
ACTION IS A COST  
TO BE BORNE.**

# 'BUILDING THE BRIDGE'


## EJF'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMERICAN JUSTICE-CENTRED CLIMATE ACTION

In order for a truly just transition which protects all people and our shared planet, we need to increase our ambition on climate action and mainstream human rights and climate justice within all policies. This will require those with the most historic responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions to step up their commitments and take on a fair share of climate mitigation and adaptation burden. Carbon neutrality by 2050 is too late for the big emitters like the US to protect the planet and the frontline communities at home and abroad from the devastation of the climate crisis: the US must commit to achieving net-zero carbon by 2035. Climate mitigation is the most powerful form of protection - the longer we wait to reach net-zero, the higher the cost to people and the planet. EJF urges the Biden Administration and the American government to:

### 1. INCREASE AMBITION: ACTION TODAY TO MITIGATE AND ADAPT TO OUR HEATING CLIMATE WILL SAVE LIVES AND PROTECT COMMUNITIES.

- Work with climate allies such as the European Union to strengthen global climate leadership and vision ahead of COP 26.
- Set more ambitious science-based decarbonization targets to avert climate collapse and meet the targets of the Paris Agreement to limit heating to 1.5°C. Central to this must be a commitment to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2035.
- Increase the ambition of the US' NDC to reflect the most up-to-date science and account for the US' historical responsibility for global greenhouse gas emissions. The US Fair Shares NDC, developed by climate activists, calculates that given its historical emissions and current economic power, the US is responsible for a global emissions reduction of at least 195% of US greenhouse gas emissions below 2005 levels by 2030 or 14 gigatonnes annually by 2030.<sup>92</sup> This should include at least a 70% reduction of domestic emissions paired with financial and technical support for an additional 125% reduction in developing countries.<sup>93</sup> The Fair Shares NDC calculates that in order to help meet that 125% international reduction, the U.S should commit at least \$800 billion between 2021-2030 split equally between support for mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage.<sup>94</sup>
- Pass an ambitious legislative package to translate climate targets into concrete action plans. We are at a crossroads for urgent climate action, and the longer we wait, or delay with half measures, the higher the likelihood that we overshoot the Paris Agreement targets and cause devastation to people and the planet. It is urgent that Congress pass an ambitious legislative package such as the promised Build Back Better plan as soon as possible: we simply cannot afford to wait or to have critical climate provisions watered down in the name of 'bipartisanship'. This legislative package should specifically cover pathways for reducing emissions from carbon-intensive sectors





such as aviation, transport, industrial manufacturing and the power sector, as well as protections for and restoration of climate-critical biodiversity such as blue carbon ecosystems.

- Set a price on carbon for industrial emitters to complement a clean electricity standard, which mandates grid decarbonization targets. By immediately setting a high benchmark cost for carbon – starting at at least \$100 per tonne and rising over the next 5 years according to the pace of change in carbon reduction – and setting total carbon market caps, we can take decisive action to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Crucially, a carbon price must be designed to incentivize rapid decarbonization across industrial emitters and not to penalize low-income communities; as part of this justice-oriented design, revenue from carbon pricing must be redistributed to support the green transition for frontline communities. A US carbon pricing system must not allow for trading or offsets which would undercut real reductions in emissions, and must

be accompanied by the immediate phasing out of all fossil fuel subsidies and strong incentives for renewable energy uptake.

- Transition to 100% renewable energy by 2030. In order to achieve a just transition to renewable energy systems, policies must focus on affordability and accessibility to renewable energy utilities for underserved and marginalized communities, including promoting community-owned, peer-to-peer and microgrid models for resilience, sustainability, and equity.
- Commit to 30% nature protected and restored by 2030, with a long term goal of 50% protection. All conservation policy must be developed in consultation and partnership with Indigenous peoples and local communities in ways which center their rights and knowledge of nature. Conservation policy must also specifically address the ‘nature gap’ where low income and communities of color have less access to nature close to home than wealthy and white communities.<sup>95</sup>

Luo Lei / Unsplash



Science in HD / Unsplash

## 2. CENTER JUSTICE AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE IN ALL CLIMATE ACTION.

- Adopt the Green New Deal as a statement of principle for linking social policies with environmental and climate action under a frame of restorative justice, and pass impactful legislation to invest in climate action climate action and an equitable green transformation of the American economy. The just transition in the US must seek to redress historic injustices by actively prioritizing communities that have suffered first and worst from the adverse impacts of our carbon addiction and extractive industries for the benefits of the green transition. President Biden's Justice40 initiative represents a good start, but the 40% of funding allocated to frontline communities must represent the floor, not the ceiling of ambition.
- Provide dedicated funding for protecting the food security, health, livelihoods, and other human rights of vulnerable communities from the impacts of global heating already 'baked in' to our climate. This must also include increasing the 6% spend on pre-disaster investment as set under the 2018 Disaster Recovery Reform Act in order to build the resilience and adaptive capacity of frontline communities. All funding must be used to finance long-term investments in frontline communities, not as one off benefits, and investment decisions must be made in partnership with affected communities to promote accountability, close historical gaps, and engender lasting change.
- Implement an EPA "No Hotspots Policy" to prevent local pollution and pollution impacts on marginalized communities.<sup>96</sup>
- Direct all federal agencies to require cumulative impact risk assessments and studies in planned work and policies affecting frontline communities. Government departments should limit the use of economic cost-benefit analyses as the primary tool for regulatory review, and expand the use of other broad and robust science-based analytical tools which consider a broader range of factors.
- The US must meaningfully reevaluate its relationship with tribal nations and Native American communities to redress centuries of exploitation and injustice. This will mean increasing investment in Native communities and tribal communities for better human rights outcomes, addressing barriers to participation in relevant decision-making processes such as resource and water allocation, inclusion of Indigenous and local traditional knowledge and practices for mitigation and adaptation within the toolkit of climate solutions, and embedding Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as a requirement in all US economic and development plans on, near, or likely to impact tribal nations. President Biden must also take action now to stop Line 3 and other planned pipeline projects which have been resoundingly rejected by Indigenous communities.
- Reform FEMA disbursements so that all communities impacted by disaster receive the necessary support, regardless of immigration status.



Fabrice Florin

### 3. TACKLE THE CLIMATE CRISIS AS A CROSS-CUTTING HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE.

- Prioritize a ‘whole of government’ approach to stop climate collapse and ensure a just transition to a more sustainable and equitable future for all. This requires integrating mitigating and adapting to global heating into every political portfolio and government department. Government net-zero targets need to be enshrined in law, and all climate action must embed justice and protection for human rights at its core. While President Biden’s executive order on the “all of government approach” is promising, it is now critical that federal agencies actually deliver and do everything within their respective mandates to mitigate climate risks, reduce emissions, and improve justice outcomes.
- Recognize the cross-cutting human rights elements of the climate crisis. Justice-based climate action requires bold policies to address other historic inequities, including immigration reform, tackling systemic racism, and combatting income inequality in the US. Failure to address global heating as a human rights issue will lead to failure to stop wholesale climate breakdown.

**FAILURE TO ADDRESS GLOBAL HEATING AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE WILL LEAD TO FAILURE TO STOP WHOLESAL CLIMATE BREAKDOWN.**



**“NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE, WE ARE ALL  
IMPACTED BY THE CLIMATE CRISIS.**

**AND FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT BEING HEARD, FOR  
THOSE WHO ARE UNDERREPRESENTED, WE HAVE  
TO CONTINUE TO FIGHT, BECAUSE WE DESERVE  
TO BE LIVING IN A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT.”**





PEOPLES  
CLIMATE  
MOVEMENT

NO!  
DRIVE OUT  
TRUMP/PENCE  
REGIME!  
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IN CLIMATE

MAKE THE  
THERE IS NO  
CHOCOLATE CA  
ON A DEAD  
PLAN

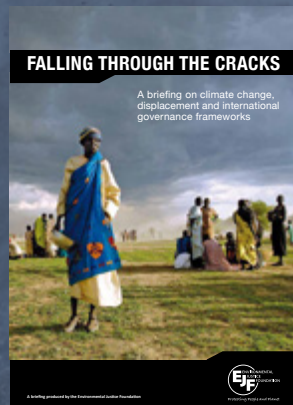
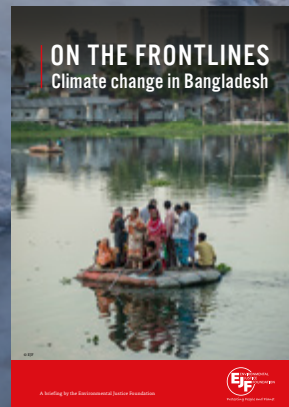
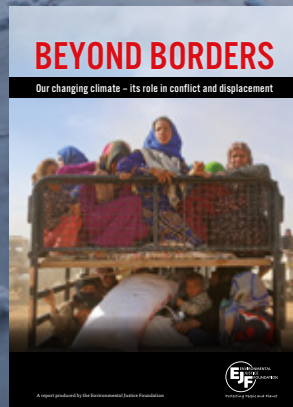
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The oceans are  
RISING and so  
are WE





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