

Mainstream Green Is Still Too White

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Last year was the hottest on record for the continental United States, and it wasn't an outlier. The last 12 years have been the warmest years since 1880, the year the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration began tracking this information. And climate scientists predict that the devastating blizzards, droughts, hurricanes, and wildfires we've been experiencing lately will worsen due to climate change.

In many ways these punishing weather events feel like Mother Nature seeking revenge for our failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the primary cause of global warming. Despite abundant evidence, the U.S. government has yet to pass a law that would force a reduction in these emissions.

During his first term, President Obama did make climate change a priority, both in his campaign and in office. The American Clean Energy and Security Act that Congress produced passed through the House in June 2009 by a narrow margin. Yet the bill never reached a vote in the Senate, and it died quietly.

Environmentalists have been flummoxed ever since. One prominent cause-of-death theory says that large mainstream (and predominantly white) environmental groups failed to mobilize grassroots support and ignored those who bear a disproportionate burden of climate change, namely poor people of color.

With Obama in for a second term and reaffirmed in his environmental commitments, climate legislation has another chance at life. Now, observers are wondering if mainstream environmentalists learned the right lessons from the first climate bill failure and how they'll work with people of color this time around.

Anatomy of a conflict

To hear some environmental leaders tell it, their defeat wasn't due to a lack of investment in black and brown people living in poor and working class communities, but to an over-investment in Obama. For example, Dan Lashof, climate and clean air director for Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), has blamed the president for having the audacity to push healthcare reform and he's pointed the finger at green groups for being too patient with Obama.

Asked what environmental advocates who led the first climate bill effort could have done differently in 2009, Bill McKibben, founder of the online grassroots organizing campaign 350.org, says their game plan was too insular. "There was no chance last time because all the action was in the closed rooms, not in the streets," he tells Colorlines.com.

Yet that "action" took place behind closed doors for a reason: Major mainstream green groups including the Environmental Defense Fund and The Nature Conservancy teamed up with oil companies and some of the biggest polluters and emitters in the nation to form the United States Climate Action Partnership (USCAP). This ad hoc alliance was the driving force behind the failed 2009 bill and there were no environmental justice, civil rights, or people-of-color groups at the USCAP table.

Obama can't be blamed for the blind spots of major groups. As recent Washington Post and Politico articles have pointed out, their leadership and membership simply don't reflect the race or socioeconomic class of people most vulnerable to climate change's wrath.

Sarah Hansen, former executive director of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, argued recently that the mainstream has been stingy with funding and resources and inept at engaging environmental justice communities. In a National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) study, "Cultivating the Grassroots: A Winning Approach for Environmental and Climate Funders," Hansen reported that philanthropies awarded most of their environmental dollars to large, predominantly white groups but received little return in terms of law and policy. Meanwhile, wrote Hansen, too few dollars have been invested in community- and environmental justice-based organizations.

According to the NCRP report, environmental organizations with \$5 million-plus budgets made up only 2 percent of green groups in general but in 2009 received half of all grants in the field. The NCRP also found that 15 percent of all green dollars benefited marginalized populations

between 2007 and 2009. Only 11 percent went to social justice causes.

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