

Press Statement by NJEJA issued Jan. 15, 2013

Hurricane Sandy and Environmental Justice

Hurricane Sandy demonstrated that all communities are vulnerable to a storm of its ferocity and the New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance urges the state to marshal all of its resources and continue to help those who are still in immediate need of electricity, food, water, clothing, shelter and medical care.

We want to remind everyone that some communities are especially vulnerable to storms and other events that may be related to climate change. These particularly vulnerable communities and people include children, the elderly, the homeless, the chronically ill, the disabled, individuals in long term care facilities, low-income communities, and communities of color.

While we are concerned about all communities, as environmental justice advocates it is our special mission to protect communities of color and low-income communities from disproportionate pollution and disproportionate effects of climate change. These communities are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to a lack of resources and disparities that exist in our society caused by a number of factors including historical and ongoing racial discrimination.

The Katrina disaster taught us that disparities based on race and income can exist in impacts caused by the storm and in the long road to recovery. To ensure the equitable recovery from Hurricane Sandy that all New Jersey residents desire, attention must be given to the unique challenges that face low-income, of color and other vulnerable communities. We must also take steps to make sure that all communities are equally resilient to the next extreme weather event that assaults New Jersey.

An array of actions must be taken and issues addressed to ensure an equitable recovery and equitable resiliency. Achieving an equitable recovery includes making sure that:

- 1) voices from low-income residential communities, of color residential communities and the environmental justice advocacy community are included in the storm-related dialogue;
- 2) there are no barriers unique to low-income or of color communities that prevent their residents from receiving the resources necessary for immediate survival, receiving the resources to rebuild, or returning to their neighborhoods if they were displaced; and
- 3) neighborhoods with multiple polluting facilities that experienced flooding due to storm surges are free of contamination.

The issue of contamination caused by flooding is one that merits significant attention. It is not unusual for communities of color and low-income communities to contain a disproportionate number of polluting facilities. When these areas are flooded there is an increased potential for contamination that may result in detrimental health impacts to residents. Responsible officials and agencies must make sure to inspect flooded areas for possible contamination left behind by receding waters. If contamination is found then curative actions must be taken.

Addressing the above three issues will also help to make low-income and of color communities more resilient to the impacts of climate change but more will have to be done to reach the level of resiliency that is needed. Existing environmental, and other disparities, that plague low-income communities and communities of color will have to be addressed in order to achieve true climate change resiliency. The state must address the disproportionate siting of polluting facilities in these communities and cumulative health impacts related to it. The use of energy efficiency and renewable energy should also be maximized in low-income and of color communities.

Addressing the disproportionate siting of facilities will reduce pollution in these communities and help reduce environmental disparities. Addressing cumulative impacts will help reduce health disparities. And implementing energy efficiency and renewable energy extensively in these communities can provide economic opportunities to residents and therefore help reduce economic

disparities. In order to achieve resiliency with respect to contamination caused by storm surges, neighborhoods that have both a disproportionate number of polluting facilities and an increased risk of flooding must be identified. These communities must be protected from both of these public health dangers.

Due to climate change there is an increased probability that we will face more storms like Sandy and other extreme weather events. Our hearts and minds are with all victims of Sandy, especially those who lost family members and had their homes damaged or destroyed. New Jersey should continue to use whatever resources are necessary to address the immediate needs of storm victims. We also urge the state to take actions to ensure that all communities recover equally from Sandy and are equally prepared for the next storm. We stand ready to help in any way possible.