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It’s clear that climate change is here now and already having a profound effect on the places we live. Here in the nation’s capital, where I have lived for over a quarter century, D.C. will be hit hard by climate change. The city experienced intense heat waves over the last decade, and the Washington region is expected to see a substantial increase in extreme heat days in coming years. Residents will also confront growing health risks from flooding, infectious diseases and poor air quality. The Potomac River has risen approximately one foot since 1933 and could rise another 24 to 48 inches over the next century, according to a report prepared by the mayor’s office. Flooding and storm surges will threaten homes, businesses and landmarks like the Jefferson Memorial and could create sewer overflows.

The city also faces increased extreme weather risk. Hurricane Sandy has drawn renewed attention to extreme weather concerns. Global warming is increasing America’s risk of damage from superstorms, according to the recently released draft National Climate Assessment. Hotter ocean temperatures add more energy to storms, and warmer air holds more moisture, causing storms to dump more rainfall. Storm surges are rising on top of higher sea levels, so more coastline floods during storms. Sea levels are rising 60 percent faster than expected, according to a study published recently in the journal Environmental Research Letters.

If we want a healthy climate, we have to cut greenhouse gas pollution with the urgency and ambition the science demands. We need to take significant steps now on all levels -- globally, nationally and locally -- to curb greenhouse gas pollution and avoid the worst effects of runaway global climate change. On the national level, the Clean Air Act is our current best hope to reach this goal in the United States. But the Act is under significant attack from the fossil fuel industry and, put simply, EPA is not moving as urgently and ambitiously as the science demands.

"The question is not whether we need to act.... The question now is whether we will have the courage to act before it's too late." Those were President Obama’s words during his landmark climate speech this past summer at Georgetown University. That speech marked a new, aggressive commitment to addressing the climate crisis by using climate pollution as a yardstick for major energy and environment decisions. The president laid out an ambitious vision for a clean-energy future that would generate jobs, promote healthy communities, and set an example for the world.

That's why we can't help but question why the Environmental Protection Agency would consider performance standards for new gas fueled power plants that could lock in continued reliance on fossil fuels for decades and fail to carry out the president's vision. Although the EPA's proposed standard for coal plants will reduce carbon pollution, the standards for natural gas will not require new plants to perform any better than old ones. By setting carbon-pollution standards for new and existing gas-powered power plants that don't achieve any actual emissions reductions -- even though we have the technology to do so -- the EPA's proposal gives the natural gas industry a free pass to pollute. That means no reductions in carbon pollution from natural gas. Clearly, this would be a colossal missed opportunity.
Failure to use this once-in-a-generation opportunity to require the natural gas industry to use existing pollution control technology will undermine the president’s environmental legacy. An International Energy Agency report concluded that converting from coal to gas in the electricity sector would still fuel a global temperature increase of six degrees Fahrenheit. That is unacceptable. If the EPA is serious about the climate crisis, it needs to be serious about reducing emissions from all power plants -- regardless of whether they are fueled by gas or coal.

Remember, too, that burning more natural gas inevitably means more drilling and fracking -- and more pollution. That pollution, which causes respiratory problems and premature deaths, disproportionately harms low-income communities. But all Americans are affected by it. In fact, a recent UT Austin study found that greenhouse gas emissions from fracking for gas alone were equivalent to 10 million cars on the road each year -- and that's just the pollution from fracking, not counting the emissions when the gas itself is burned or leaks along transport lines. Giving a free polluter's pass to natural gas plants is an attack on everyone who values clean air and safe drinking water.

The anticipated June 2014 proposal for existing power plants gives the Administration a perfect chance to get it right. Bear down on the dirtiest power plants. End the subsidies to fossil fuels that number in the multiple billions of dollars every year. Don’t get sucked into a cap and trade morass under the Clean Air Act. Regulate industrial biomass that is often as dirty as coal. Aggressively invest in small scale solar, wind and geothermal. History will look kindly at a President and EPA that takes bold steps not based on quarterly profits of corporations but on the long term security of our people.

To counter the assault on the Clean Air Act, to further educate about the urgency of the climate crisis and the tool we have in the Clean Air Act, and to both support and prompt action by you, the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute launched “Clean Air Cities,” a nationwide campaign urging cities around the United States to support use of the Clean Air Act to make significant reductions in greenhouse gas pollution.

Working with our volunteer Clean Air Advocates across the country, 74 different communities have passed resolutions. Big cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Miami have passed resolutions. Small communities like Boone, NC, Teton County Wyoming and Keene NH have passed resolutions. We have industrial cities like Gary, Indiana and Pittsburgh PA and Detroit. We have cities stretching from Miami to Nashville to Honolulu that have all come together to call on you to use this powerful tool, the Clean Air Act.

In March of this year, the DC City Council requested that the EPA administrator work to get the U.S. to achieve its share of a global 350 ppm standard of carbon. For the first time in human history, we are now over 400ppm. Someday soon, I hope to be standing in front of this audience talking about National Ambient Air Quality Standards for greenhouse pollutants, which are now at their highest level ever. Methane pollution – over twenty times more powerful than carbon dioxide – may be our worst nightmare yet with the Arctic melting, landfill expansion, runaway natural gas fracking, and ever increasing meat production and associated waste.

On behalf of the Center’s more than 625,000 members and supporters and the now 74 communities that have passed resolutions like DC’s, I urge you to not only act now, but also to act with the ambition so desperately needed if we are serious about averting climate catastrophe.