

Virtual Public Hearing for the Task Force on Climate Change
Milwaukee Riverkeeper Comments
July 15, 2020



My name is Cheryl Nenn and I'm testifying on behalf of Milwaukee Riverkeeper. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the priorities of the State's Task Force for Climate Change. We appreciate the time and resources put into creating a comprehensive Climate Action Plan for Wisconsin, as well as the opportunity to comment.

General

Wisconsin must quickly and equitably reduce our carbon emissions in order to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. We know climate change is already happening. 2019 was the hottest year on record globally, and the past decade was hottest ever recorded. Wisconsinites are experiencing more flooding and extreme weather events. 2018 and 2019 both beat rainfall records in SE Wisconsin, and floods that were supposed to happen every 20 years, 50 years, or 100 years, are happening much more frequently. More rain equals more polluted runoff, and this increased rain is negatively impacting water quality, leading to more algae, dirtier water for recreation, increased outbreaks of harmful algae blooms, and more threats to drinking water from pathogens. Milwaukee remains infamous for the *Cryptosporidium* outbreak in 1993, which came after a severe storm, and remains the largest documented outbreak of waterborne illness in the US.

We know that most of the carbon pollution in Wisconsin is coming from power plants and transportation, so I want to address those sectors in particular tonight. We need to ensure that Wisconsin does everything we can to reduce our carbon emissions, and to position ourselves better to adapt to climate change impacts. In addition, we know that those most directly impacted by the worst effects of our warming climate will be communities of color, economically disadvantaged communities and communities that are already experiencing other structural injustices. We need to do better

Energy

The We Energies Oak Creek Power Plant is costing ratepayers \$75 million more per year to operate than if the plant were shut down and energy were purchased off the grid. We Energies spends millions of dollars per year to purchase coal. Wisconsin has no coal mines, so this money gets sent out of state and does not support Wisconsin's economy.

From mining through transportation, storage, burning, and disposal, coal for energy production is toxic at every step, and is a major source of greenhouse gases contributing to climate change. To make sure Wisconsin achieves its carbon-free electricity by 2050 goal, we need to transition our electricity generation away from fossil fuels and towards solar, wind and energy efficiency. Energy generated by renewable sources such as solar and wind now costs the same as or less than energy generated from coal and without the extra costs to our health and environment.

In the meantime, we need to better contain coal dust and other health hazards from the transportation, storage, burning, and disposal of coal; set more stringent standards for air and water pollution limits from power plants, as well as put in stricter requirements for disposal and reuse of coal ash. We support recommendations made by the Clean Power Coalition to eliminate the use of coal and mandate retirement of all coal-burning power plants by 2030.

Transportation

Transportation emissions are the largest category of greenhouse gas emissions in America, and the second largest in Wisconsin after coal. Sadly, Governor Evers and WISDOT Secretary-designee Craig Thompson recently announced that the state would seek to resume plans to rebuild and expand 3.5 miles of Interstate 94



in Milwaukee at over a billion dollars, which Gov. Walker had cancelled the billion-dollar project due to high cost and community opposition to the project. Communities of color are disproportionately impacted by our polluting, car-centered transportation system, and by highway expansions like this one.

The I-94 project will double down on these negative impacts on all fronts. It will also significantly increase runoff both to our combined sewers, increasing the likelihood of sewage overflows, and also send increased pollution directly to the Menomonee River, the Milwaukee River, and Lake Michigan.

The I-43 expansion, which was also delayed by Governor Walker, is also ramping up under the Evers administration. The first phase of highway expansion goes from Silver Spring Drive in Milwaukee to Hwy 60 in Grafton, but we should all expect this highway will be expanded all the way to Green Bay/Door County and beyond. The dramatic increase in impervious surfaces and corresponding runoff expected from this highway expansion, will be the death knell for several small urban creeks like Ulao and Indian that are already heavily impacted by the existing highway footprint.

If we really care about climate, we should not be expanding highways, which just increase the use and reliance on cars and greenhouse gases, increase pollution, and exacerbate flooding. These highway expansion projects have no inclusion of transit or even allow for future transit corridors to be built. These projects will dramatically increase air pollution and runoff to local rivers and Lake Michigan. Fix failing infrastructure and address safety issues with existing bridges, by all means, but do not increase the footprint of our highways in southeast Wisconsin.

Investing in public transportation would better reduce road congestion, slash transportation emissions, and benefit our communities in many other ways -- from cleaner air and water to improved public health and better access to work, school and leisure opportunities. Many young people are not attracted to Wisconsin to live and work due to the lack of public transit. Many of the young interns we have attracted over the years have relocated to Minneapolis and other urban centers throughout the country.

Flooding/Water Quality

Lastly, we need to more quickly update our floodplain maps in Wisconsin. We have many people developing in areas that are within the 100-year floodplain due to old and inaccurate maps that have not been updated to consider increased flows from development upstream and increased and more volatile rainfall patterns from climate change. This development further exacerbates water quality and flooding issues, and is a threat to public safety. In addition, given changes in rainfall and severe wet weather, we should consider increasing protective areas around waterways and areas restricted to development to the 250-year or 500-year storm floodplain areas. We also need to invest in our failing infrastructure for sewage and drinking water to make ourselves more resilient in the future to severe wet weather events caused by climate change. We have already seen increases in combined sewer overflows the last 2 years due to extreme rainfall, and these trends will only increase if we can't find additional resources beyond the State Revolving Funds to address very old, failing, and leaky pipes in our urban and rural areas alike. More funding also needs to be invested into green infrastructure that can better absorb rainfall and snowmelt, and infiltrate it into the ground versus sending it directly to our rivers and lakes and drinking water supplies.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments!