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Environmental Benefits for Each and Every New Yorker



By Norris McDonald

To address the challenges associated with global climate change, as well as improve air quality in general, the need to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other harmful pollutants is more important than ever. Carpooling, buying hybrid cars, retrofitting older buildings with more efficient technologies, reducing waste and using mass transit are but a few ideas that can help reduce emissions.

Fossil fuel burning power plants account for approximately one-third of total carbon dioxide emissions in the United States. This ratio is unlikely to change drastically in the near future. However, thought must be given to developing clean and more efficient sources of energy while at the same time keeping clean sources of power like hydroelectric and nuclear power plants online.

Unfortunately, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and others are advocating closing two of the state's six nuclear reactors at Indian Point, even though they produce no carbon dioxide emissions or air pollution. Given New York State's growing demand for electricity and the fact that it would take four to five coal or natural gas-powered plants to replace Indian Point, shutting down that facility would increase carbon dioxide emissions by 14 million tons each year.

Communities of color are the ones subjected to the highest degree of nitrogen oxide and other toxic emissions that come from the older, dirtier power plants, bus depots, industrial and chemical factories. Heavy industry and power plants are almost exclusively placed in the poorer communities. As a result, asthma and other respiratory illness are more prevalent among our children. Does anyone honestly believe that a new power plant will ever be sited in the affluent communities of Westchester?

Instead of focusing on trying to shut down clean sources of energy, the DEC should be taking measures to clean up our environment. With all the plans to mark Earth Day, there has been little talk on how to improve the environment of minority neighborhoods.

It is true that there continues to be no single answer to address the challenges posed by the growing demand for electricity and the need to reduce greenhouse gases and air pollution. But the first step is to promote a balanced approach that will guarantee we can improve the environment and air quality for each and every New Yorker.

Norris McDonald is the president and founder of the African American Environmentalist Association and an Advisory Board Member of the New York Affordable Reliable Electricity Alliance (New York AREA) www.area-alliance.org.

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