



Guest Commentary

Most compelling reason to act on climate: our children's health

by **Gina McCarthy** • Administrator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



McCarthy

I didn't plan for a life built around protecting the environment. In fact, I started my career as a health agent in Canton, Mass. But at some point I realized that at its core, the issue of a clean environment is a matter of public health — and our children are particularly vulnerable to environmental health hazards.

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) responsibility to protect public health and the environment is driven in large part by our duty to protect our kids. Today, climate change is supercharging health risks especially for our children.

Carbon pollution fuels climate change, and power plants are our nation's largest source. That carbon pollution comes bundled with other harmful pollutants like nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide that cause respiratory problems like asthma, especially among children. Although the United States already limits power plant pollutants like mercury and arsenic, there are no limits on carbon pollution.

I'm encouraged to see pediatricians nationwide educating families and calling for action. You're making a difference already. Surveys continue to show that a majority of Americans recognize climate change as a threat and want commonsense limits on carbon pollution. And the most compelling reason cited is — you guessed it — our children. But we have a lot of work left to do.

Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Units across the country provide advice on environmental causes of illness in children. We know that climate-related health risks are disproportionately higher for communities of color, lower-income families and tribal populations that deal with relatively higher rates of asthma and exposure. Pediatric health professionals have an obligation to sharpen their understanding of the health effects of poor air quality in a changing climate — because there's no voice more credible than public health professionals to

convey that our climate crisis is a public health crisis. That's why the American Academy of Pediatrics has called for reducing carbon pollution, and public health organizations nationwide have done the same.

On June 2, the EPA answered that call by proposing standards to limit carbon pollution from power plants. Our standards would not only cut carbon pollution by 30% in 2030, they'll also slash other harmful pollutants that threaten respiratory and cardiovascular health. In the first year those standards go into effect, they'll help avoid up to 100,000 asthma attacks and 2,100 heart attacks.

History shows that children's health has been a driving force for commonsense environmental protection. For example, we know exposure to mercury in the womb harms the developing nervous system and has adverse effects on cognitive thinking and fine motor skills. That's why we have environmental protections in place to reduce mercury exposure. Similarly, our medical understanding that lead in our kids' blood impedes brain development propelled us to phase out toxic leaded gasoline. And learning about the risks of secondhand smoke fueled a movement that has led to a dramatically healthier environment for our children.

The public health community's voice has always been vital; with climate change, our obligation to speak for children's health and act to protect it is as clear as ever.

As the EPA works to finalize carbon pollution standards next June, I urge pediatricians across the country to keep making your voices heard. Speak up at our public listening sessions, comment on the rule itself, and share your thoughts on Facebook and Twitter using the hashtag #ActOnClimate. All health professionals can agree that the easiest ailment to treat is one that never develops. As pediatricians, as public servants and as parents, let's fulfill our obligation to this generation and beyond by acting on climate change.