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Environmental Movement Of '90s Looking For Justice

Leaders Focus On Cleanup Of Minority Communities

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WASHINGTON

THE ENVIRONMENTAL movement, which began in the 1970s, reflected the priorities of its prosperous, mostly white leadership.

But in the 1990s, a growing environmental justice movement is calling for special efforts to clean up minority communities, contending that inner-city black and Hispanic residents, as well as American Indians on reservations, are more likely than whites to be exposed to toxic wastes and other pollutants.

The movement's approach differs from that of the superfund program, which identifies specific waste sites and cleans them up.

"We look at the hazards in a community as a whole, rather than each being site-specific," says Charles Lee, director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice. Lee has advised the Environmental Protection Agency on environmental justice issues.

"If you were to take a bunch of sites, all of which may comply with standards, it doesn't mean that cumulatively there is no risk in that community," Lee said. "Moreover, there may be other sites that are completely undocumented."

He says the high incidence of asthma in many minority communities underscores the multiple aspects of environmental problems.

"Asthma is a controllable disease that is caused by several different sources and is exacerbated by many others," he said. "The incidence is so high in minority communities, because of greater exposure to allergens, greater susceptibility to those allergens, because of inferior living conditions, and the inability to address it, because many residents lack adequate health care."

On Feb. 11, 1994, President Bill Clinton lent support to the environmental justice movement by issuing an executive order requiring that all federal agencies include the achievement of environmental equity among their goals.

The same year, the environmental agency set up an Office of Environmental Justice and established the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council to study the impact of environmental policies on different income and racial groups. The council also will provide grants to help communities around the country identify and address local environmental problems.

Some activists say the environmental justice movement is getting a vital boost from efforts to encourage redevelopment of contaminated industrial wastelands in cities across the country. These "brownfields" usually are empty lots that once contained factories, oil-tank farms or smelters.

Because the level of contamination is too high to permit redevelopment, but too low to merit priority treatment under the federal superfund program, brownfields often are left to languish as urban eyesores. Potential buyers are frightened away by fears that they will be held liable for past pollution in future lawsuits, while others give up because bankers and insurers refuse to provide financing and liability coverage for such risky investments.

The Clinton administration is offering a two-year "brownfields initiative" aimed at luring businesses to locate in these lightly polluted areas. The program provides federal grants of $200,000 to industrial developers of polluted sites.

This year, Clinton would expand the program by proposing to grant tax breaks to companies that buy brownfield sites, clean them up and build new businesses on them. Under the proposal, included in the president's plans for the fiscal 1997 budget, businesses could deduct the full cost of cleaning up brownfield sites.

Environmental justice activists praise the initiative as a ray of hope. "The heart of the issue is to bring back to life communities which are distressed," Lee says.

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