

With an Eye on the Future, Ethnic Californians Embrace Environmentalism



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SAN FRANCISCO – A year after an explosion and fire at the Chevron refinery in Richmond, Calif. sent 15,000 people to emergency rooms, thousands of people converged in the city over the weekend to call attention to health risks to communities that live near oil refineries.

Environmental activists and residents who live near the refinery, who are mostly Latino, black and Asian, called for a move away from fossil fuels.

Their sentiments echoed the findings of a poll released last week that shows that an overwhelming majority of Californians want the state to act now to address global warming instead of waiting for the economy to improve – with the strongest support voiced by Latinos, African Americans and Asians.

The Public Policy Institute of California survey found that nearly two-thirds of whites felt that way, while 88 percent of Latinos, 83 percent of blacks, and 78 percent of Asians held that view.

Sonja Petek, research associate at the Public Policy Institute of California, who manages projects for PPIC’s Statewide Survey, said the finding shows an urgency among Californians – especially among minority residents -- to counter to effects of climate change.

The results highlight that ethnic communities “care about the environment,” says Rue Mapp, the founder of OutdoorAfro.com, speaking at a news briefing on Monday.

“We can no longer overlook people of color,” she said. “They care about the mitigation of

environmental challenges and they vote.”

Latinos and blacks perceived a greater threat from global warming than Asians and whites, while majorities across all racial and ethnic groups favor the state’s landmark climate change law (AB 32) that rolls back greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

About two-thirds of Latinos (67 percent) and blacks (63 percent) view global warming as a “serious threat” versus 40 percent of whites and 38 percent of Asians.

Latinos and blacks – 71 percent and 61 percent, respectively – also voiced stronger support to adapt to climate change than whites and Asians (42 percent and 49 percent, respectively.)

The levels of concern among Asians may not be as high as for Latinos and blacks, Petek said, but levels of support “for government intervention or policy to address those issues,” were just as high.

Miya Yoshitani, associate director of Asian Pacific Environmental Network, said Asian Americans strongly support policy action on climate change.

“They want to see progress now, not wait until the economy recovers,” said Yoshitani, “and they aren’t buying into the jobs versus environment frame.”

The poll also found that Californians buck the trend in terms of support for fracking, a controversial drilling method used to extract oil and natural gas from rock formations.

Fifty-one percent of Californians oppose fracking, while nearly one-third favor it. A Pew national survey released in April found that 48 percent of Americans favor fracking, while 38 percent oppose it.

Californians favor the building of the Keystone XL pipeline that would transport oil from Canada to refineries in Texas, but with lower levels of support compared to the rest of the nation.

Fifty-one percent of Californians support the building of the pipeline, compared to 66 percent of Americans, according to the Pew study.

“The idea of renewable energy is very positive among Californians, much more so than the idea to increase fossil fuels,” said Petek.

One reason for this may be that a majority of state residents (66 percent) believe state efforts

to reduce global warming would either create more jobs or have no effect on the number of jobs. Only one in four said those policies would lead to fewer jobs.

“Californians don’t see this as a jobs killer, they see it as a benefit to the state,” Petek said.

Michel Gelobter, founder and chairman of Cooler, a clean-tech consulting firm, said the state’s “cap and trade” policy that sets limits on carbon dioxide emissions has the potential to be a “great engine for the economy.”

Under cap-and-trade, refineries must gradually lower their emissions -- or buy or trade "allowances" to meet the new standard. The state makes revenue through the sale of allowances.

State law directs a quarter of the cap-and-trade auction proceeds to disadvantaged communities through a special fund. But so far they haven’t seen any of the money. Gov. Jerry Brown redirected (<http://newamericamedia.org/2013/05/in-may-revise-gov-brown-raids-fund-to-tackle-climate-change.php>) the revenues from the fund in its first year-- \$500 million – to the general fund.

Advocates will be watching closely next year to make sure the money that is supposed to go to low-income communities actually reaches them.

“We have to make sure solutions [to address climate change] also benefit low- income communities,” said APEN’s Yoshitani.

When polled on how the cap-and-trade revenues should be spent, Californians overwhelmingly favored spending it on public transit, such as buses or reduced transit fares, and housing near public transportation.

An overwhelming majority of Californians (83 percent) say it is important to spend the money on disadvantaged communities. Blacks and Latinos are most likely to consider investments in disadvantaged areas “very important.”

Gelobter said the strong support among Latinos, blacks and Asians for tackling climate change reflects that they “poll for their vision of the future.”

Like whites in the 1950’s, he said, who supported policies to create their vision of a better future through a premier university system, minority residents want to invest in forward-looking energy policies that foster healthy communities and environments and spur the economy.