News
EarthBeat



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 1, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

At public hearings this week in the heart of coal country, local and national Catholic groups argued the moral case for preserving national standards on carbon pollution from power plants.

The hearings, held Nov. 28-29, in Charleston, West Virginia, provided a forum for environmental advocates, energy lobbyists and everyday people to weigh in, in three-minute increments, on the fate of the Clean Power Plan.

In October, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed a full repeal of the regulation, which supports says is an integral step in the nation's efforts to confront climate change.

"The Clean Power Plan is a sane program to begin to deal with climate change," Jesuit Fr. Brian O'Donnell, director of the Catholic Conference of West Virginia, said in testimony he delivered on the first day's hearings. "Perhaps it should be reformed. Certainly such an effort shouldn't disappear."

Finalized in 2015 under President Barack Obama, the Clean Power Plan set a target to reduce carbon emissions nationally from existing coal- and gas-fired power plants by 32 percent from 2005 levels by 2030. The carbon regulation formed the backbone of the U.S. commitment under the Paris Agreement, the deal among 195 nations to commit to reducing greenhouse gas emissions toward holding average global temperature rise between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius (2.7 to 3.6 Fahrenheit).

The power sector is the nation's largest source of carbon pollution, which is the primary driver of climate change. As the planet warms, already 1 C (1.8 F) since 1901, climate scientists expect to continue to see worsening droughts, more intense wildfires and flooding, and more extreme severe weather events.

"The impacts of climate change are harming people, especially our poor and vulnerable neighbors, right now," said Jose Aguto, associate director of Catholic Climate Covenant in testimony delivered Nov. 29. He pointed to forest fires in the West and the recently concluded hurricane season that battered Texas, Florida, the Gulf Coast and Caribbean islands, including Puerto Rico, with historical winds and rainfall.

In his opening remarks, O'Donnell said he came to the hearing "to share the concern of the Catholic Church concerning the danger of climate change to humanity," noting the impact Pope Francis and others has stressed it has and will have on poor and vulnerable communities.

"The Catholic Church is worldwide, and Church leaders have been hearing about the thawing of the Canadian tundra and the gradual disappearance of Pacific islands," O'Donnell said.

The Jesuit priest added that U.S. bishops for years have recognized the scientific consensus on climate change — that the planet is warming largely due to human activity, a conclusion recently reaffirmed by the fourth National Climate Assessment compiled by EPA and a dozen other federal agencies — and "have urged action on reduction of fossil fuel use."

O'Donnell went on to reference Francis' message to the recently concluded United Nations climate change conference where he warned against "four pervasive attitudes in seeking solutions to climate change: denial, indifference, resignation and trust in inadequate solutions.

Catholic Climate Covenant, whose 17 national partners include the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, urged EPA not to revoke the Clean Power Plan outright, saying "Its repeal, without a viable and operational alternative, constitutes inaction which we cannot afford."

The two days of hearing in West Virginia represented the only public session EPA scheduled for comments for its proposed Clean Power Plan repeal. The agency has left open the possibility for future hearings.

Before proposing the rule, the Obama administration held 11 listening sessions and four public hearings after it was proposed, Reuters reported. During that period, Catholic Climate Covenant encouraged Catholics to submit responses, as they have done during the current repeal effort. The deadline for written comments is Jan. 16, 2018.

In announcing the forum in West Virginia, Pruitt said in a press release, "The EPA is headed to the heart of coal country to hear from those most impacted by the CPP." As Oklahoma attorney general, Pruitt joined 26 other attorneys general in challenging the carbon pollution rule in court. Paused by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2016 as a lower court reviewed the cases, the rule has never gone into effect.

Advertisement

A report from the Washington Post documented the back-and-forth nature of the hearing's first day, with coal executives and some miners touting the regulation as job-killing and overreaching, while other miners and health advocates pointed to health complications from a life in the mines and the impact of pollution from burning coal on their communities.

"Our health, environment and global climate are actively being destroyed," said Stanley Sturgill, a 72-year-old retired Kentucky miner with respiratory issues, according to the Post. "… For the sake of my grandchildren and yours, I call on you to strengthen, not repeal, the Clean Power Plan."

Several analyses of the Clean Power Plan estimated it would result in the prevention of up to 150,000 childhood asthmas attacks, 6,600 premature deaths and 2,800 hospital admissions. Representatives of the American Lung Association and Moms Clean Air Force were among those speaking at the hearing.

O’Donnell stated in his testimony that church leaders are “quite aware” of impacts reducing fossil fuel use have on communities in coalfields and oilfields, and that it’s important such communities have a voice in the transition planning. “The Clean Power Plan, to its credit, includes initiatives for such participation,” he said.

Related: Appalachian coal country, where sisters see little change in 40 years

The drive from Washington D.C. to Charleston, with coal-carrying trains passing through West Virginia’s natural beauty, was “eye-opening,” Aguto said, to the importance coal — despite its economic decline due in large part to the rise of natural gas and automation — continues to hold in certain parts of the state.

“It’s good in a way for us to be able to see the reality that other people in our nation are facing in places that we don’t often visit,” he said.

What Catholics and the larger faith community can bring a moral and nonpartisan perspective to the discussion around the Clean Power Plan, Aguto told NCR.

“It’s beyond politics, it’s beyond economics, it’s about our common future,” he said. “We need a moral compass with regard to climate change and not just an economic one. And we need to move the needle of the moral compass toward climate action.”

At the end of his testimony’s three-minute limit, O’Donnell stated, “Along with many other faith groups, the Catholic Church judges that the EPA should continue to develop effective efforts to deal with the danger of climate change, not ignore this danger to all.”

[Brian Roewe is an NCR staff writer. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]