

Veronica Garibay: Climate law fuels Fresno's moment in the sun

By Veronica
Garibay

Like many Fresno Bee readers, I was touched by the story of Salvador Mendoza of Southeast Fresno ("Program gets solar power to residents in struggling Fresno neighborhoods," May 6). Mendoza, who suffers from a debilitating lung condition, was among the first of 20 low-income homeowners in our area to receive free rooftop solar panels made possible by California's groundbreaking clean energy and climate law, AB 32 and the Low Income Weatherization Program. Solar panels will slash his family's energy bills by 75%, making it easier for him to afford the \$2,000-per-month medication he needs for his lung disease.

There are many more families like the Mendozas. Families of all income levels must see tangible benefits from our state's bold climate leadership within and beyond AB 32's cap-and-trade program. Proceeds from cap and trade must support the long-term sustainability and health of disadvantaged communities like Mendoza's neighborhood in the form of quality jobs, clean energy, affordable housing, improved transit, cleaner air and reduced energy costs.

Funds must be invested strategically in disadvantaged communities to reduce contributions to climate change while also improving the environmental and economic health of families. Projects and programs focused on clean energy, energy efficiency, weatherization, tree planting, water conservation, affordable housing, transit access and walkable communities can do just that. Technical assistance and outreach will help ensure resources reach the most disadvantaged and isolated communities.

Gov. Jerry Brown's revised budget estimates that cap and trade will reap \$2.2 billion through 2016 to invest in efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, create jobs and provide more energy choices. By law, at least 25% of the funds must benefit the most disadvantaged residents —families who already bear the brunt of pollution and dirty air and suffer the worst impacts of our changing climate.

My organization, the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, advocates for low-income, rural families in the San Joaquin and East Coachella Valleys. We speak up on issues that impact local families the most, including environmental health, housing, transportation, pedestrian safety, food access, water quality and drought.

In our community, climate change is more than an abstract concept. We suffer the consequences every day, and experience its dramatic impact on our health and livelihoods. We are experiencing more extreme heat and weather events, and winter simply passed us by this year. People lack places to go when it's too hot or too cold to stay safe at home. Drought and uncertain precipitation patterns hits low income residents hardest. When agricultural employers cut workers' hours due to more frequent and severe droughts, more impoverished families line up for free food at the monthly distributions in Lanare. When Fresno-Madera ranks as the most polluted region in the nation, it reveals that people here desperately need better options to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

That's why Salvador Mendoza's story resonates with us. For too long, oil has been our only option for fueling our lives. As of January, transportation fuels were covered under cap and trade. The oil industry is now fully complying with AB 32 after having spent tens of millions on lobbyists and a deceptive public relations campaign in a last-ditch effort to skirt the law. Now that the industry is paying to cover some of the costs of its pollution, AB 32 climate investments will grow to provide even greater opportunities in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.

As Californians are noticing the policy's benefits at the community level, even its critics are changing their tune. At an event to celebrate the Mendoza family's new solar panels, Assembly Member Henry T. Perea of Fresno admitted: "You're turning me from a skeptic to a supporter." His turnaround is encouraging because we've long bemoaned the lack of resources to address some of the causes, and impacts, of climate change. AB 32 is changing that.

To succeed, we need more champions and fewer skeptics — policymakers with an open mind to join the chorus of voices supporting these unprecedented investments in a sustainable future, especially here in the Valley. Now is our time to shine.

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