



Climate justice for the most vulnerable

COVID-19 has taught us many lessons. We have learned how vulnerable underserved communities, people of color, indigenous people, women, elder care facilities and prisons can be. They have been disproportionately affected by sickness, hospitalization, death and financial stress.

While some at the upper income levels have fared better than others, many of those at the lower end still struggle and are on the edge of health and financial crisis. There are similarities between what we have experienced with COVID and what the future may bring with a warming climate.

As documented by NASA, 2016 and 2020 are the warmest years in recorded history. More people and more nations are committed to dealing with a changing climate than ever before. The impacts of a changing climate are diverse and, unfortunately, disproportionate.

Climate justice highlights disparities in how our communities and governments serve our citizens. We have seen these disparities in our responses to COVID-19 infections, precautions, and vaccine deliveries. If we do not learn how to better address these inequities, climate change will disproportionately affect underserved populations.

Climate justice is more than a term. It is a movement to address inequities in how climate change can affect vulnerable communities.

"Climate change is happening now and to all of us. No country or community is immune," according to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. "And, as is always the case, the poor and the vulnerable are the first to suffer and the worst hit."

It is ironic and deeply unfair that people whose lifestyles contribute the least to climate change will suffer the most from its effects.

Longer, drier, hotter summers will be more difficult and likely less productive for those working outside. At home and in the office, hot days are an inconvenience for many, but most of us can just turn up the air conditioning, a privilege not shared by many with lower incomes. Recent research has shown that low-income neighborhoods often experience as much as 7 degree Fahrenheit increase in temperature over more affluent communities, due to increased amounts of asphalt and concrete and less shade.

Heat, respiratory illnesses, insect-borne diseases and other health challenges increase in response to elevated temperatures. To many, hotter, drier summers and more intense storms are an inconvenience. When you are living on the edge, however, these stresses can be disastrous.

As many organizations and communities develop diversity, equity and inclusion policies, there is an opportunity to turn words into actions when preparing for future impacts of a changing climate. We continue to address challenges in providing access to health care, education, housing and wages that support families.

We are more aware of distrust in government and communities relating to systemic racism. Underserved communities often struggle to influence policies and practices influencing their lives and well-being. What many of us take for granted can be barriers for others. The more we understand these barriers, the better we can embrace meaningful equity and inclusion in addressing issues, such as a warming climate.

Solutions should meet the needs of the people most impacted. To do this, we need a concerted effort to listen and understand those needs. Which combination of language, housing, access to affordable health care, education, food security and other issues do our underserved and low-income communities see as their priorities? How can trust be improved? Only by increasing our understanding of these priorities and issues can effective adaptation and mitigation strategies be developed for climate justice.

With COVID we are establishing a new normal for how we work, educate and interact within our communities. A changing climate will bring new normals as well. As we are learning with COVID, underserved communities and lower-income populations are more vulnerable than most. Those who suffer the most tend to be those with the fewest options. Our region is fortunate to have many diverse communities.

What we are experiencing with COVID can help us learn how to deal with societal inequities. We have the capacity to reduce the impacts of a changing climate on our most vulnerable citizens if we have the collective will.

Jeff Blackwood spent his career with the U.S. Forest Service and is a member of Eastern Oregon Climate Change Coalition, a nonprofit dedicated to sharing science-based information on climate change.