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From a “Green Farce” to a Green Future

Refuting False Claims About Immigrants and the Environment

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Introduction and summary

Combating climate change and reforming our broken immigration system are two of the greatest challenges facing Congress and the Obama administration. Legislation to address these issues has come up short thus far. Both have been fiercely debated throughout the country and many Americans demand solutions.

In the midst of these debates anti-immigrant groups are revamping their efforts to play these issues against each other using misinformation. These voices have long argued that immigrants destroy the environment, accelerate climate change, and undermine U.S. efforts to transition to a clean and green future.

Nativist organizations and hate groups are attempting to drive their political agenda using environmental concerns as a cover. And conservative lawmakers and opponents of clean energy and climate legislation who use phony environmental arguments as a political wedge are promoting these groups' talking points.

These arguments are a “green farce.” They’re supposedly presented out of concern for the environment but are intentionally misleading and dangerously misinformed. They present Americans with a false choice between achieving fair and humane immigration reform and climate legislation that will respect the environment and lead our country to a clean and prosperous energy future.

Immigrants should not be blamed for the nation’s climate woes. In fact, they deserve better recognition for the valuable contributions they make toward a “greener” society and economy.

Environmentalists and advocates of the green economy must reject false choices and distractions from the greater imperative to fight the true causes of pollution and climate change: our dependence on fossil fuels and our unsustainable systems of energy consumption.

This report strikes down many of the false arguments regarding immigrants and the environment, provides a clearer picture of immigrants' environmental contributions, and outlines real environmental solutions that can cut carbon and curb climate change. Key findings include:

- The assumption that immigrant-driven population growth alone drives the U.S. carbon footprint is false. The 10 highest carbon-emitting cities have an average immigrant population below 5 percent, according to a 2008 Brookings Institution study.
- The cities with the lowest carbon footprint, on the other hand, have an average immigrant population of 26 percent.
- Immigrants, especially recent immigrants, tend to lead “greener” lifestyles than the native-born and are more likely to use public transportation and practice sustainable habits like compact living, conservation, and recycling.
- Immigrants, who are largely low income, are also more likely to have their lives disrupted by extreme weather events and other adverse effects of climate change.
- Addressing climate change and poverty on a global scale will help stabilize immigration flows from undeveloped countries.
- Immigrants are disproportionately hurt by the dirty energy economy and face unique environmental challenges. Consequently, they fight for greener solutions, including challenging the use of hazardous pesticides in the agricultural fields where many immigrants work. A successful campaign by immigrant farm workers during the 1960s led to the banning of the dangerous pesticide DDT.
- 2010 polls of key electoral states find that immigrant-rich communities overwhelmingly favor policy that will create green jobs and tend to support congressional candidates who back efforts to fight global warming.
- Immigrants are integral to driving clean energy innovation. They accounted for 70 percent of men and women who entered the engineering and science fields from 1995 to 2006 and 40 percent of all high-tech venture-backed companies.

Instead of blaming immigrants, the report recommends the following actions the United States and other countries can take to start cutting pollution and getting a handle on climate change:

- Get more energy efficient. A national energy efficiency standard—which would set mandatory annual electricity and natural gas consumption reduction targets for utilities—can save 262 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. That’s the equivalent of taking 48 million cars off the roads for one year and saving 390 power plants from being built.
- Expand renewable energy. Renewable sources of energy such as the wind, sun, and waves have practically zero GHG emissions. Remarkably, only 7 percent of our current national energy portfolio comes from renewable sources, not counting hydroelectric power. A good start for the United States would be to set a national standard of 25 percent of energy produced to come from renewable sources by 2025.
- Curb deforestation. Tropical deforestation is responsible for more emissions than all the cars, trucks, planes, and ships in the world combined. The United States—along with the rest of the world—must transition to more sustainable building materials and enact legislation that protects forests.
- Limit fossil fuels. We can end our addiction to oil through reasonable and cost-effective policies. These include improved fuel economy standards, development of advanced bio-fuels, incentives for nonpolluting electric vehicles, and use of natural gas, which produces fewer emissions than other fossil fuels. Older coal-fired power plants can be retired with national energy efficiency and renewable energy standards, and we can use advanced battery storage and cleaner-burning natural gas for our fail-safe power.
- Plan smart cities. Elements of smart cities, also referred to as “smart growth,” include widely available mass transit and walking-bicycle paths (to curb vehicle travel), compact residential and commercial development (to curb overuse of open space), and efficient use of electricity and water through networked resource management, also called a “smart grid.”

Nearly all credible environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, have rejected bogus arguments about immigrants and climate change. But fringe organizations continue to cloud our national discussions about immigration reform and clean energy. It’s time to set the record straight.

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