

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE CAUCUS AT BROWNFIELDS 2009: ABOVE WATER AND MAINSTREAM

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The Environmental Justice Caucus at Brownfields 2009 met Sunday evening, November 15 at Kearny Hall on the campus of Dillard University, home to the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. With more than 160 participants from non-governmental organizations, cities, tribes, states, the private sector, and U.S. EPA, this was the best attended Caucus in the history of the national Brownfields Conference—even though the event took place across town from the New Orleans Morial Convention Center and the temptations of the French Quarter, on the night before the Conference opening.

The venue itself was symbolic. Dillard, like most of New Orleans, was flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. University Executive Vice-President Dr. Walter Strong welcomed the participants, explaining not only that the university had recovered from the hurricane, but that it is undertaking an ambitious construction program that includes several LEED® Gold buildings. The caucus was chaired by Dr. Beverly Wright, the Deep South Center's Executive Director, whose memorable slide show at the November 2005 Caucus in Denver brought the devastation of Katrina to a national brownfields audience.

Phil Johnson of the Sustainable Communities Development Group reported on the recent Capitol Hill Summit, and EPA Brownfields office director David Lloyd explained that the Obama Administration is making his program accountable for addressing environmental justice issues. But the main event was the talk by EPA's Assistant



Administrator for the Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, Mathy Stanislaus. As a private citizen, Stanislaus was a regular participant in past Caucuses since their beginning, so his presence underscored the Obama Administration's commitment to environmental justice.

Stanislaus emphasized the importance of area-wide revitalization, as opposed to viewing brownfields only as individual parcels. The area-wide approach helps ensure that the necessary services and infrastructure improvements accompany property redevelopment. He discussed the importance of placing graduates of brownfields job training programs, and he announced a partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and EPA to promote safe urban agriculture. Stanislaus repeated his invitation for community activists to contact him directly at aastanislaus@epa.gov.

Audience members, as well as the moderator, Dr. Wright, made it clear that they respected Stanislaus' commitment to environmental justice, but they still intended to "hold his feet to the fire." One person asked EPA to address the serious remaining waste disposal issues faced by New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in general more than four years after Hurricane Katrina. Participants reiterated that there is a lot of training for green jobs that do not yet exist, or which are difficult to access, and they warned of the obstacles to training and employing former offenders. Stanislaus offered, as a partial solution, his office's efforts to promote Renewable Energy on Contaminated Lands and Mining Sites.



Following a buffet dinner, most caucus members joined one of six break-out groups, designed to enable dialogue among the diverse participants. The groups focused on Capacity Building, Green Jobs/Worker Training, Health Disparities, Housing, Revitalization, and Working with the Private Sector. In addition, there were two informal Caucus sessions late the nights of November 16 and 17 at the Riverside Hilton Hotel, each attended by about 15 people.

The discussion groups covered a wide range of subjects in varying detail, but a few common themes emerged. The overarching concern of community representatives is that more needs to be done so that the areas which have lived with the downside of brownfields can benefit from their cleanup and revitalization—with new, affordable housing; convenient transportation; vibrant services and retail; and good jobs.

The most common discussion point—in several discussion groups—was how to ensure that the graduates of worker training programs actually find careers. Some participants noted difficulties creating cooperation with unions and educational institutions, as well as the shortage of consistent “green” employment, but others reported that their programs have achieved a strong placement rate.

Community participants expressed challenges figuring out which government agency could meet their needs, from EPA to Housing and Urban Development to the Agency for Toxic Substances Control at the federal level to states and local government.

Finally, several participants agreed that technical assistance is often the key to successful community-based campaigns.

Overall, it seemed the non-government participants in the Environmental Justice Caucus were hopeful that Obama administration will be more responsive to their needs, not only at brownfields, but on a wide range of environmental and community development issues. But they believed that the new leadership will not magically make things better in EJ communities. It will still take a lot of time and a lot of work.