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Democrats push for broad 'environmental justice' funding in Biden's infrastructure package

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House Democrats call it “environmental justice” — the pumping of federal dollars into minority communities that proponents say are more severely impacted by climate change — and it’s being shoehorned into every possible spending item in President Biden’s proposed \$2.25 trillion infrastructure package.

“The Americans who have paid the highest price for pollution have mostly been people of color and those in low-income communities,” said Rep. Paul Tonko. “Their exposure to pollution has resulted in higher rates of respiratory illnesses, of cancer or premature death.”

Mr. Tonko, a New York Democrat who serves on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, is a leading proponent of the Climate Leadership and Environmental Action for our Nation’s (CLEAN) Future Act.

The bill, which seeks to remake the economy to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, includes several climate change provisions Democrats want to included in Mr. Biden’s infrastructure package.

The White House proposal already adopted the climate change bill’s suggestion that 40% of all new investments go to low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. It also incorporates more money for achieving one of the bill’s main goals — a carbon-free electricity standard by 2035.

Democratic lawmakers, however, want to go further by incorporating ample spending for environmental justice programs.

“Environmental injustice can be attributed to many things, from intentionally racist policies like red-lining ... to unequal investment in these communities,” said House Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone Jr. “Climate change and deteriorating infrastructure are exacerbating these problems and this inequality.”

Despite the best efforts of Democratic lawmakers to promote the idea, uncertainty persists about what constitutes environmental justice and how it should be addressed.

First appearing in the 1980s, the term was initially used to describe a fairer distribution of natural resources and more equal protection from environmental hazards for low-income and minority communities.

In recent years, the term has been co-opted by progressives and social justice advocates who apply it to their broader calls to end what they identify as systemic racism in America.

Republicans are wary of environmental justice rhetoric.

Rep. David B. McKinley said Democrats' characterization of the term was used to disguise the impact of "job-killing" regulations.

"Environmental justice is central to an agenda to eliminate fossil fuels from the power sector by 2035," said Mr. McKinley, West Virginia Republican. "The consequences of which will leave workers, families, children and entire communities in poverty. Where is the justice in that?"

Mr. Biden, who campaigned for the presidency as an avowed moderate, has embraced the cause since taking office. The president proposed the creation of a new Justice Department specifically focusing on environmental justice.

The administration also is requesting more than \$1.4 billion for various environmental justice initiatives from Congress.

Mr. Biden, however, remains vague as to where exactly the money will go. For instance, his \$1.4 billion budget request simply states that two-thirds of the money will go to "create good-paying union jobs, clean up pollution, and secure environmental justice for communities that have been left behind."

Chris Edwards, the director of tax policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said such vagueness should raise concerns given the federal government's history of harming "minority and poor communities with its past infrastructure investments and urban renewal policies."

"Communities including poor communities should fear that grand Washington schemes such as Biden's will end up being disastrous and having all kinds of negative and unanticipated effects," Mr. Edwards said. "It is better to let states and communities make their own public investments, rather than far away officials in Washington."