

POINT OF VIEW: PARENTS FOR A CLEAN ENVIRONMENT



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The Charlotte skyline rises above a layer of smog as motorists drive along Interstate 77 in this 2011 file photo.

Fear pollution, not clean air rules

Speaking to a crowd of farmers and their families recently, North Carolina's Lieutenant Governor Dan Forest warned of "environmental terrorism" disrupting agribusinesses in the state and putting farmers out of business: "[They] are coming after you, trying to shut down your business while you're trying to work harder and harder." Yet, this scare tactic masks a simple truth: the real terror facing us is the human health impact, especially on children, of dirty air and dirty water.



Dan Forest

Who are these so-called "environmental terrorists"? Certainly not the scores of parents I work with every day across the state from all political persuasions. These parents feel a deep responsibility to protect their children, who are vulnerable to adverse health effects of pollution.

No parent rushing to the emergency room pre-dawn because their child cannot breathe ever thinks about political party or what might be an "allowable" level of pollution. No, that parent only wants their child to be able to breathe. Does this protective love and basic desire for clean air make parents terrorists? Well, our lieutenant governor would

have you believe it does.

As the second highest elected official, Forest *should* be talking about opportunities to reduce asthma rates in our state so our children can thrive. According to the NC Department of Health and Human Services, asthma is the leading medical cause of school absences. When kids miss school to get treated for asthma, their parents miss work and the family's medical bills balloon. Almost a third of children in North Carolina visited an emergency department or urgent care center in the past year alone because of asthma.

Asthma and a host of chronic lung diseases affect people of all political beliefs. These people are not terrorists but they do live with the terror of falling ill and the crippling fear of going outside when air quality is bad. The bombastic rhetoric and casual use of the term "terrorism" shows the lieutenant governor's

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complete disregard for his duty to listen to and care for all citizens in this state.

As a native of western North Carolina, I recall a childhood in which trees on the mountain tops died from acid rain. I remember the smell of the smog haze as it settled into the valley during the peak of summer. As I grew up, I saw how the state came together to take strong action to reduce air pollution by passing the Clean Smokestacks Act, among other measures.

In fact, North Carolina had a proud and long tradition of working together to clean up air pollution, but sadly this shared value has come under attack in recent years by some leaders in our state. Together, they repealed numerous public health protections, eliminated the diesel idle rule, lifted the ban on fracking for natural gas, and allowed the Renewable Energy Investment Tax Credit to expire. The lieutenant governor's latest comment is only further proof that this administration does not take seriously our state's constitutional mandate to "conserve and protect its lands and waters for the benefit of all its citizenry...to control and limit the pollution of our air and water..."

If the lieutenant governor wants to talk about the environment and terrorism in any real-world context, he should brush up on Pentagon reports

which found that climate change is a national security threat with the potential to foster terrorism globally.

The same pollution making our kids sick is also causing our climate to change at an accelerated rate which should be concerning for farming communities. Our farms need clean air and water to thrive but they also need a stable climate. This year is on track to be the warmest year on record. Hotter months affect the growing season and lead to a rise in extreme weather events like hurricanes, flooding, drought, and wildfires. Farmers are at risk for loss of property and displacement. Talk about shutting down businesses.

As the mother of a very active 4-year-old boy, I don't believe that my demand for my son to breathe clean air while playing outside with his friends is an act of terrorism.

All of our children deserve leaders who care about protecting their little lungs from harmful pollution. Every parent and grandparent has the right to ask our elected leaders for this basic form of protection without fear of intimidation or being called a terrorist. Join me this November in voting as if your child's health depends on it. Because it does.

Veronica Butcher served as Policy Advisor on Energy & Environment to former Gov. Bev Perdue and is the national campaign manager for Clean Air Moms Action, a project of the Environmental Defense Action Fund.