

Statement on Paris Climate Agreement and the year ahead from the Climate Change and Health Team at the Office of Health Equity, California Department of Public Health

We laud the Paris Climate Agreement as a significant milestone marking a coming of age of the global social movement for climate justice that pushed for a binding agreement. California's delegation headed by Governor Brown led over 123 states and municipalities to commit to bold reductions in greenhouse gases to limit warming to under two degrees Celsius. Yet the Paris Agreement will not in itself prevent catastrophic climatic changes, nor reshape our economic and social inequities.

We recognize that the drivers of climate change and health inequities share similar roots: inequitable distribution of social, political and economic power resulting in systems that maldistribute resources and drive greenhouse gas emissions. Fair and healthy climate resilience requires addressing the inequalities that create and intensify institutional, community level and individual vulnerabilities.

The capacity for resilience in the face of climate change is significantly driven by living conditions and the forces that shape them, such as income/wealth, education, housing, transportation, environmental quality and access to services such as health care, healthy foods and safe spaces for physical activity. Thus, strategies such as alleviating poverty, increasing access to opportunity, and reducing health and social inequities will result in more climate-resilient communities.

If climate change solutions are not approached with an equity lens, we could transition to a clean energy system with the same unfair economic and social structures in place, thereby maintaining health inequities. Climate change investments in physical infrastructure should build in anti-displacement measures and economic development opportunities for communities facing health inequities so that they don't inadvertently sabotage climate change and health equity goals.

The momentum behind the Paris Climate Agreement is a springboard to increase action to keep fossil fuels in the ground while transitioning rapidly to a sustainable economy that rectifies historical disadvantage and provides equitable opportunity for all people to thrive.

Public health professionals dedicate their lives to keeping people healthy through primary prevention, and protecting those most vulnerable from harm. The health sector is showing that actions taken to slow climate change hazards can also bring health benefits by increasing physical activity, reducing chronic diseases, cleaning our air and water, increasing food security, deepening social connections, and improving mental health.

The health sector cannot achieve the results needed without joining with individuals, families, communities, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and government sector partners. Humanity has the capacity to come together to sharply reduce greenhouse gas emissions while protecting the well-being and health of all communities who currently suffer from health inequities.

In the Office of Health Equity Climate Change and Health Team we are working with local health department partners in every region of California and at the state level to bring health equity to the forefront of climate change work in every sector and every initiative. We look forward to 2016 being a year of decisive action to continue to reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions, while also strengthening the systems that promote climate change resilience and that ensure opportunities for health and well-being are the California way of life.