



The Daily Dish

The Environmental Justice Puzzle

DOUGLAS HOLTZ-EAKIN | FEBRUARY 24, 2023

According to *The Hill*:

The Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday announced another \$550 million that it is putting toward addressing environmental inequity after [previously outlining \\$100 million in funding for the issue](#).

Through this latest round of funding, the EPA will select up to 11 community-based nonprofits that will then dole out grants aimed at cutting pollution.

The latest round is being issued through local nonprofits as part of an effort to make it easier for communities who may not have the resources to complete a challenging federal application, the agency said.

Both programs are part of \$3 billion that the Democrats' climate, tax and healthcare bill put toward environmental justice — that is, attempts to reduce pollution-related inequality.

One might cynically conclude that this is just the cover story for distributing walking-around money to Biden Administration supporters. I am that cynical, but let's take this initiative at face value for a while. First, what problem is being solved? That is, why is pollution not distributed evenly across the population?

It could be that there are different standards of enforcement: Entities in heavily polluted areas are simply not in compliance with EPA emissions regulation. If so, it is not obvious what giving half a billion dollars to community groups will do to address this. But even more important, I have never heard even the suggestion that differing standards of enforcement are the problem, so let's rule that out.

It could be that weather, water drainage, and other topographical features cause airborne and waterborne pollutants to concentrate in certain localities where lower-income individuals and communities of color tend to reside. It's not obvious, again, what \$550 million in the hands of local do-gooders will do to alleviate this problem.

Of course, other things equal, land is relatively expensive in pristine locations and relatively cheap in dirtier locales. One could try to "solve" this with a massive wealth transfer to these communities — and the Biden agenda writ large is essentially just that — but that would simply create more bidders for the "good" places and higher prices yet. On the flip side, reduced demand for the "bad" places would lower their land prices. Ultimately, the economic incentives will offset the policy initiative and undercut the attempt to eliminate inequity.

This raises the second major question: What constitutes success? Since perfect equality is an unreachable goal, how much environmental inequity is “just”? Unless one can answer that question, one can’t design a policy to hit that level of inequity, and the effort will simply be an exercise in giving out money to no particular end.

Except re-election.