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Congress must protect kids from pollutants

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Reducing global warming, decreasing dependence on foreign oil and investing in clean energy alternatives are critical reasons for legislators to enact strong energy and climate control legislation, which many members of Congress say is a top priority this month.

But one of the most important and overlooked justifications is that at the dawn of the 21st century, America is raising a generation of children that is growing up less healthy than earlier generations because of increasing exposure to environmental toxicants.

Since 1997, my colleagues and I have been following more than 500 mother-child pairs from pregnancy and birth through school age, examining the respiratory health, cognitive development and cancer risk in children prenatally exposed to chemicals generated by fossil fuels.

The results have been sobering. Approximately 40 percent of the children we are following were born with DNA damage associated with air pollutants produced principally by fuel burning from cars, trucks, buses, power plants, industry, incinerators and residential heating. Such genetic alterations have been tied to an increased risk of cancer in both children and adults. Poor children tend to be disproportionately exposed to the pollution and vulnerable to its effects.

The newborns we've studied also have higher levels of genetic damage per unit exposure from these pollutants than do their mothers, indicating that the developing fetus is particularly susceptible to these carcinogens. Babies with high prenatal exposure had reduced birth weight and head circumference and significantly lower scores on tests for cognitive development, administered at age 3, and they were more likely to be developmentally delayed. Finally, prenatal exposure to these pollutants is linked to immune changes and symptoms indicative of increased risk of asthma.

Our children can't afford to wait for action on bills that have languished for years on Capitol Hill. The Lieberman-Warner bill, which sets limits on carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions, has passed out

of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. It, along with the energy bill, which is poised to pass in the House today, will be the first important steps in reducing our addiction to fossil fuels.

But powerful oil and coal lobbies will continue to pressure Congress to weaken any proposed bill that has enough teeth to significantly slow global warming. Legislators must stand strong against this pressure and act instead on behalf of those most in need of their protection.

If the suffering of our most vulnerable citizens and their families is not enough to spur Congress to do the right thing, the members should at least recognize that as a society we will avoid significantly greater monetary and social burdens if we act now to safeguard the long-term health of America's children.

In its final report Nov. 17, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that the world must reverse the growth of greenhouse gas emissions by 2015 to prevent serious climate disruptions.

Congress can play a role in this reversal if it will act now to turn years of legislative talk into strong and decisive action.

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