Blacks urged to join climate debate

By Bo Petersen
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Sam Campbell of McClellanville, an advocate on environmental issues, believes that the black community needs to get involved in climate concerns.

Video

U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn and others talk about the environmental, economic and health need for black Americans to get involved in climate change issues. Then they tour a Clemson University experimental biofuel field growing switchgrass. Watch »

Issues poll

A recent poll of 750 blacks found climate change was not a paramount issue for many:

"What is the most important problem facing the country?"

The economy, 42 percent

Rising gas prices, 17 percent

Global warming, 5 percent

FLORENCE—When former vice president Al Gore talked about climate change, a lot of people in the South Santee community didn't pay much mind, Sam Campbell said.

"You see it, but it went over your head," said the resident of the community near McClellanville. "When it's hard living on a $500-per-month fixed income, hard to pay the light bill, pay for (natural) gas, go to town and buy gasoline, that's when it hits home."

That's the notion behind the Commission to Engage African-Americans on Climate Change, an effort led by environmental groups to bring carbon fuels and the debate into the voting forefront of people in black communities. They tend to produce less carbon emissions than other groups but pay a steeper price in economic, health and environmental impacts, studies suggest.

Those are the people along the I-95 corridor that U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., represents, he said. "We know that here in South Carolina we have a disparity in health care," Clyburn said.

They are the "fuel poor," said S.C. Rep. Terry Alexander, of Florence.

The Carolina Climate Network held a press conference Wednesday to get the word out, then took Clyburn, Alexander and members of environmental organizations on a tour of an experimental switchgrass field at the Clemson University Pee Dee Research Center in Florence, to highlight the potential biofuel. It's a native South Carolina plant and can boost agriculture revenue.

Clyburn restated his opposition to opening new areas offshore for oil and gas drilling, calling it sacrificing long-term solutions for a quick fix. He championed funding research at universities to develop biofuels like switchgrass and sugar cane. Those are solutions that can help people along I-95, environmentally and economically, he said.

"We have to bring in communities that will be more affected, make them part of the decision-making," Clyburn said.

"It's affecting everybody, not only African-Americans," said Campbell, who attended the press conference as a member of the McClellanville Kitchen Table Climate Study Group, a grassroots advocate on environmental issues. "The thing about it in my community is, we have a lot of people on fixed income. If (they're) hurting, sooner or later you're going to be hurting too."

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