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7 climate questions for Rep. Rashida Tlaib



BY: **AVERY ELLFELDT** | 07/15/2021 06:55 AM EDT



Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) speaks at a climate rally in Iowa City, Iowa, on Jan. 12, 2020. | Scott Morgan/REUTERS/Newscom

CLIMATEWIRE | When people talk about the intersection of climate action and financial reform, they tend to think in dollars and cents.

Rep. Rashida Tlaib wants people to think of her constituents in Detroit.

The Democratic lawmaker from Michigan's 13th District has tried in recent months to change the way lawmakers and regulators talk about fossil fuel finance. During an interview with E&E News, she said her goal is to connect the dots between global warming and the financial sector — and then demonstrate how both exacerbate environmental injustice.

Tlaib's approach marks a notable departure from typical debates over climate finance. Those discussions often are inaccessible to the average person and can devolve into Wall Street-speak or abstract fights about the extent to which global warming could undermine financial stability.

But Tlaib said her long history of environmental activism has brought her face-to-face with the real-world consequences of energy finance, particularly on people of color. She said many of her Detroit constituents have grown sick after living near a Marathon Petroleum Corp. facility that refines up to 140,000 barrels of crude oil every day.

As a result, she wants to bring attention to the financial forces — both public and private — that are fueling those conditions.

Between 2016 and 2020, for instance, Wells Fargo & Co., Bank of America Corp., JPMorgan Chase & Co., Citibank and Goldman Sachs provided Marathon with more than \$27 million in financing, according to an annual fossil fuel [report card](#) by green groups.

Years before that, the city of Detroit granted Marathon a \$175 million tax break under the condition that a major expansion project would provide dozens of new jobs for Detroit residents. Marathon later came under fire from the City Council for hiring just 15 local residents, the *Detroit Free Press* [reported in 2014](#).

“It may have started at the city of Detroit giving [Marathon] \$175 million for me to have this awakening. But then, now at the federal level, I realize how much of a huge role it is nationally that we’re continuing to do the same thing Detroit did here locally,” Tlaib said.

“The federal government, we are part of the problem,” she added. “It’s not just the banks. We actually enable it; we’re actually partners with the banks when we allow them to get this type of financing, this type of support.”

The matter came into sharp focus in May. During a hearing before the House Financial Services Committee, the bosses of Wall Street’s six largest investment banks faced questions from Republican and Democratic lawmakers about the extent to which they’re addressing a range of issues — from structural inequality to climate-related financial risks.

Tlaib tackled both topics at once. She asked some of the world’s most powerful bankers if they were familiar with the term “environmental racism.” Five executives said they were “vaguely” familiar with the idea. Morgan Stanley CEO James Gorman said he was not ([Climatewire](#), May 28).

“You all should know and be familiar with the term ‘environmental racism,’” Tlaib retorted, “because for generations, Black, brown and Indigenous communities have seen

the fossil fuel corporations use your banks to finance and construct oil and gas refineries, petrochemical plants and pipeline projects."

E&E News spoke with Tlaib about what drew her attention to the issue of climate finance, why it's so rarely connected to environmental justice and what should be done to bridge the gap.

What experiences have informed your approach to climate policy?

I think it's my lived experience of growing up in southwest Detroit. And many that do [the same] know what I mean when I say, "I thought that smell was normal." I think when I saw the smokestacks, and the line of trucks in and out from my walk to schools, to later finding out the high rates of asthma, people experiencing cancer — either dying from it or surviving it — it just led to me understanding the environmental racism that was going on.

When we left our neighborhood into more affluent places that have cleaner parks, all this stuff, it was very clear that the air and the experience there was much more humane.

What drew you to the issue of climate finance?

It was really local politics. When Marathon oil refinery wanted to expand back in 2006 to 2007, around that time, it was right in our backyard. [The company] was already having a number of issues regarding air quality, truck traffic. People were already complaining about their children experiencing nosebleeds, massive headaches.

There was already this white cross campaign in the neighborhood, where Sierra Club Detroit had people put small white crosses in front of their home if they were sick or had cancer or someone in their home died of cancer. We were trying to bring attention to the fact that Marathon Oil refinery was literally killing our community through the air, and just the impact on quality of life.

The neighborhood, literally, their backyard is Marathon oil refinery. Understanding the financing of that, and how the federal government in many ways was giving permission to pollute, permission to kill many folks through allowing the contamination of our air at such a high level.

And so that's when it was eye-opening, realizing it wasn't just the corporate greed, and the corporation, but it was the role of government — the role of government that's supposed to be about people — that really made me even more passionate about fighting against the continuation of our public tax dollars, our resources, being used to hurt our communities, especially African American communities across the country.

You recently asked six prominent banking executives if they understand environmental racism. How did they respond?

They don't even know what environmental racism is. Some were familiar, and even those that were familiar actually acknowledged that they couldn't explain it. Addressing racial equity means reversing decades of environmental racism. The first thing they have to do is recognize what that actually means.

What steps are you taking to move the needle?

Congressman Mondaire Jones (D-N.Y.) and I co-led a [letter](#) to the Federal Reserve, and we said you have to take more of an active role in addressing climate risk — including incorporating climate risk into the Fed's monetary policy, implementing supervisory measures to increase the resilience of our financial system, and encouraging investment in front-line communities of color. And the response back from Chair [Jerome] Powell was nowhere near the scale needed to address the urgency and the size of the crisis we face.

We have the ability to incentivize and enforce. And we do it when it comes to people right here in our own communities, but [not] when it comes to mega-billion-dollar corporations that are not only in the corporate welfare line, but they're also the people that make us sicker and produce impacts that it would be generations for us to reverse.

Organizers have been trying to put the human face to what doing nothing on subsidizing the fossil fuel industry [means]. There's been this consistent message that is gaslighting people to believe, well, [fossil fuel expansion] creates jobs. But they don't actually look at the fact that many of those jobs can't fix cancer, they can't fix the air quality, all of that. The cost on our lives, the cost on our public health and environment, that is something that never seems to be measured when we talk to these big banks, when we talk to those that are in power to make changes around those negative impacts.

This is why I'm not only looking at doing these with letters with colleagues to push the Fed, or really pushing my colleagues to see it from an environmental racism lens. Even the state employees have asked me to please keep pushing the "[RISE Act](#)," because federal employees who have dedicated themselves to public service, they want to divest from corporate pollution.

They want to. They see that in many cases, profits are being put ahead of our planet's future and our public health. So they have asked me: We do not want our retirement investments to be put into the fossil fuel industry; we want it to be socially responsible.

What do you make of the argument that banks need to keep supporting fossil fuel companies to help them cut their carbon footprint?

It's interesting that the banks are defending [themselves] by saying that, when the same fossil fuel industry they're financing are the ones financing the fake news, the gaslighting on the climate crisis. They're the ones funding the extremists on the other end trying to pretend that we're not killing our Earth, our planet.

So I would push back and say: The people they're financing — that “need the capital to transition” — those are the ones pushing back on the other end so there is no transition.

Why do you think equity and justice are so often left out of this conversation?

The disconnection that I saw in that committee was because they're not living it, they're not living that experience. And what makes my residents much smarter than them, much more thoughtful and much more oriented on what's right for our country, is the fact that they are bringing the human aspect of it that continues to be denied in these spaces.

These folks can try to trickle us into their board meetings, trickle us onto their executive boards and leadership in their companies, in their banks. But in the end, if they don't even know what environmental racism is, they have no intention until they're forced to actually address those issues in the Black and brown communities that I represent.

People that look like them do not live in the shadows of oil refineries.

How can lawmakers help bridge that gap?

I hope next time, we get the banks in committee, and we really want to talk about environmental justice, or the fossil fuel industry, that we actually bring people that are directly impacted by that kind of investment by the banks, or that kind of investment by our own federal government. People need to hear from the residents on the ground. So I hope we somehow start moving towards that direction.

The interview was lightly edited for clarity and length.



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