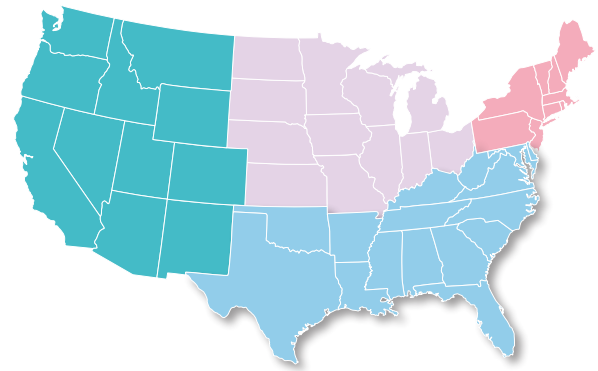


# Focus on the South

**An equitable transition away from fossil fuels to clean energy sources will improve health, save lives, and promote equity.** Momentum for action on climate change is growing, and promising climate solutions are available to protect Southern residents from the health crisis of climate change.



## Climate change is harming the health of residents in the South.

Climate change is impacting Southern residents' health and livelihoods by worsening several climate-sensitive hazards that are common to the region, including extreme heat, hurricanes, wildfires, rising sea levels, storm surges, and flooding.

- **Extreme heat:** Deadly heat waves are impacting the Southern region. In 2022, **Texas** experienced its second-hottest summer, **Louisiana** experienced one of its top five warmest summers, and Tampa, **Florida**, had its hottest summer.<sup>1</sup>
- **Extreme weather:** Climate disasters, such as hurricanes, are costly for communities and cause injury and death; damage health facilities; limit access to health care, safe water, and housing; cause loss of power; and harm mental health. Urban communities damaged by extreme weather are at increased risk of gentrification.<sup>2-4</sup> In September 2022, Hurricane Ian caused devastating impacts in **Florida** and **South Carolina**.
- **Flooding:** Flooding causes injuries, illness, and death; contaminates drinking water; and results in devastating economic losses. In August 2022, extreme precipitation in Jackson, **Mississippi** left residents without potable water for weeks.<sup>5</sup> In July 2022, severe flooding in eastern **Kentucky** destroyed communities and caused 39 deaths.<sup>6</sup>
- **Poor air quality:** Air pollution leads to lung and heart disease, poor birth outcomes, childhood asthma, and premature death. The Southeast region has among the country's highest levels of particulate air pollution.<sup>7</sup>
- **Wildfires:** Exposure to wildfire smoke can lead to heart and lung disease, premature birth, poor mental health, and premature death. In March 2022, the Eastland Complex Fire in **Texas** burned more than 54,000 acres and resulted in \$23 million U.S. dollars in agricultural losses.<sup>8,9</sup>

Racism and poverty compound these climate change challenges, as more than half of the U.S. Black population lives in the American South<sup>10</sup> and disproportionately suffers from poverty and systemic violence. Rural areas experience limited access to resources such as health care, further increasing susceptibility and exposure to climate harms.<sup>7,11,12</sup>

## Energy Security and Health

Everyone's health is at risk from climate change, but the communities contributing the least to carbon emissions bear a greater burden in high utility bills, dirty energy, and climate impacts. Gentrification and structural discrimination in housing, zoning, and the siting of industrial and transportation infrastructure put communities of color at higher risk of harm from exposure to climate impacts, air pollution, and extreme heat. Climate change is amplifying the Southern region's health inequities by compounding environmental exposure risks for those already burdened by structural discrimination (U.S. Brief 2022).

## The majority of voters in all Southern states are worried about climate change.

The majority of voters in the Southern region are worried about climate change and believe it will harm people in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> Voters in the region are supportive of climate policies, with over 70% expressing support for policies such as providing tax rebates for electric vehicles and solar panels, and expanding research on renewable energy. Across the South, over half of voters believe Congress should do more on climate change.<sup>13</sup>

## States across the Southern region are taking action on climate change.

Climate solutions are available today that will protect our health by ending our dependence on fossil fuels and slowing climate change. States across the South are working together to transition to clean and renewable energy and prepare communities to withstand climate change harms. These efforts will improve health now while creating a safer, healthier future.

- **Decarbonizing the energy sector:** In 2022, **Louisiana** adopted a Climate Action Plan, laying out a net zero by 2050 goal<sup>14</sup> and **North Carolina** set a target of 50% emission reductions by 2030 and net zero by 2050.<sup>15</sup> **Virginia** has a net zero by 2045 goal.<sup>16</sup> Communities are organizing to advance a just transition to clean energy. The Clean Up Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Coalition is a regional partnership advocating for the TVA to transition to 100% fossil-fuel free energy by 2030.<sup>17</sup> Transitioning to solar and wind energy will bring new jobs to the region including in **Alabama, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Florida, and Texas.**<sup>18</sup>
- **Leading at the local level:** City- and county-led efforts are catalyzing change. In **Georgia**, cities—including Atlanta and Savannah—have set 100% clean energy goals. The Greenville,

**South Carolina** Sustainability Plan includes goals to protect urban greenspace and improve public and active transportation. Jackson, **Mississippi** is working to reduce the risks of extreme heat.

- **Elevating Black and Indigenous leadership in policy-making spaces:** Communities across the South are leading advocacy, citizen science, and other initiatives to center Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) experiences and leadership and advance climate justice, such as **Taproot Earth**,<sup>19</sup> **Deep South Center for Environmental Justice**,<sup>20</sup> and **Southern Sector Rising.**<sup>21</sup> More investment is needed to support and elevate leadership from communities most impacted by climate change.

Several national and regional coalitions, such as the U.S. Climate Alliance and We Are Still In, provide opportunities for state leaders to learn from one another and work together to advance climate solutions. Programs and policies in the South can serve as examples for local and state governments across the U.S. For more information on climate policy solutions that can protect health and equity, read the **2022 Lancet Countdown U.S. Policy Brief.**

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