



A Rising Solution to Society's Inequalities

By Will Pettitt, GRC Executive Director

There has been a series of sad and unfortunate events this year, both nationally and around the world. It is becoming apparent that racial inequalities, COVID-19 and climate change are intrinsically linked. The geothermal industry can play a significant, and possibly even healing role, by offering solutions to some of these big-picture geopolitical circumstances.

The death of George Floyd was devastating and heartbreaking and highlighted the gross injustices in our society. As a Minneapolis resident, my family and I were wrapped up in these events at their epicenter. There have been other similar atrocities this year, like the deaths of Ahmaud Arbrey in Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and now Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta.



The George Floyd mural at 38th Street and Chicago Avenue South, Minneapolis, where he died. Photo by Will Pettitt, June 2020.

A recent article in GRIST¹ summarizes what many are feeling about these injustices in terms of the links between COVID-19, racial inequalities, and our society's needs for clean energy. California Congressman Raul Ruiz recently said, "COVID-19 has exacerbated what we have known all along... [At-risk communities are] disproportionately breathing polluted air and drinking dirty water due to neglect or decisions by others." Ruiz represents California's Palm Desert District at the heart of the geothermal industry where the GRC conference was hosted last year.

The GRIST article highlights that black and Latino communities in the U.S. suffer disproportionately from the novel coronavirus. The COVID-19 mortality rate for black New York City residents, for example, is twice that of white residents. Research also shows that exposure to air pollution likely makes COVID-19 deadlier. In other words, when it comes to COVID-19 outcomes, it's clear that race matters and that pollution matters.

In an opinion piece published by Bloomberg,² the author points to a study performed by the University of Minnesota and the University of Washington that shows non-Hispanic whites experience 17% less exposure to pollution, on average, than is caused by their own consumption. Conversely, African-Americans are exposed to 56% more than their consumption generates; the figure for the Hispanic population is 63% more.

The Bloomberg article goes on to connect the issues in a comment that resonates: "Leave any challenge to fester in the neighborhoods we don't necessarily visit, and there's a decent chance the consequences will eventually get in your face. That's true of a virus, but it's also true of racism, be it manifested in mere neglect or outright violence. And it's just as true of climate change and environmental degradation, which hit our most vulnerable communities first but ultimately care nothing for zip codes. Selective sacrifice isn't just immoral; it's a fallacy. The necessary precondition of herd immunity against multiple ills is acknowledging you're actually part of a herd."

The COVID-19 pandemic has had impacts on all our lives in one way or another and the geothermal industry has not been immune to it.³ We now have a chance as a society to make some meaningful changes. A letter was recently assembled by an alliance of clean-energy advocates in California, including the GRC.⁴ It lays out the impact of COVID-19 on the clean-energy economy and provides a vision for promoting economic recovery: "We are here to help restore lost jobs and investment, leverage clean energy to provide immediate relief for California's economy, and build a safer, more equitable, more resilient, and clean energy foundation for long-lasting economic growth."

¹ <https://grist.org/justice/a-bill-in-congress-could-get-to-the-bottom-of-how-coronavirus-links-air-pollution-and-racism/>

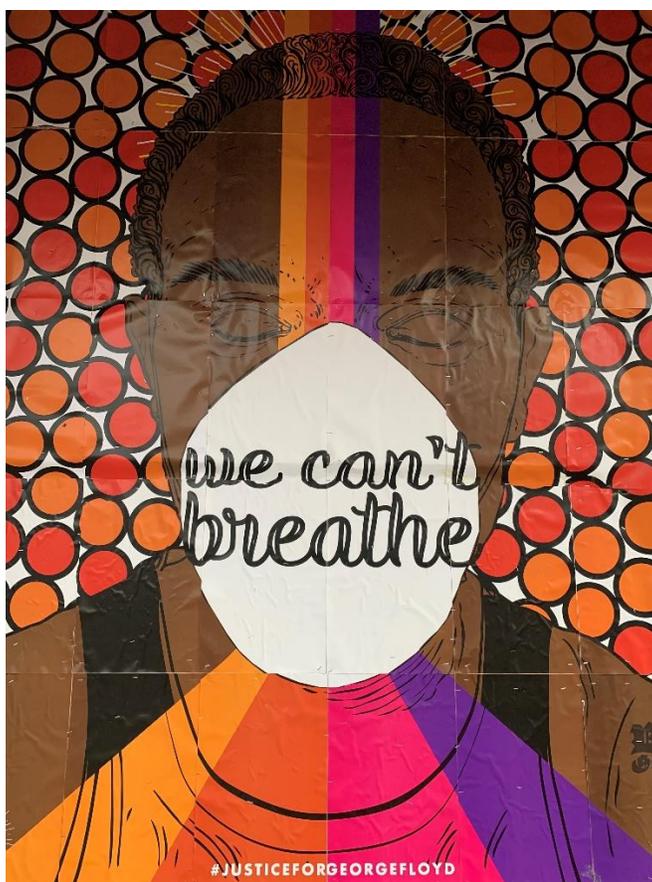
² <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-06-13/fighting-climate-change-means-fighting-racial-injustice?sref=JXWE0ED7>

³ <http://geothermalresourcescouncil.blogspot.com/2020/05/transformational-change-comes-to.html>

⁴ https://www.geothermal.org/Policy_Committee/Documents/2020/2020-06-03_Final-Alliance-for-a-Clean-Economy-Initial-Letter.pdf

Geothermal energy is a renewable and clean baseload that's always on and that works well combined with other renewable energies such as wind, solar, and storage as market penetration increases towards 100%. This is a relationship that is being illustrated in California that the world can use as an example. Through our part in the clean-energy revolution, geothermal energy clearly plays a role in the solution to deep-seated societal problems. In guidance provided by our joint letter:

“We stand in solidarity with Black communities and all communities that have been deeply harmed by our society’s injustices and inequalities. We are committed to a clean energy future and economy that is inclusive of all, for the benefit of all, and that contributes to a more just and equitable society; it cannot come to pass without acknowledging and overcoming invidious discrimination.”



Poster at the site of George Floyd’s death juxtaposes the fight against racial inequality, pollution and COVID-19. Photo by Christine Swann, June 2020.