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Opinion: Public health served by RGGI membership



Katie King/The Virginian-Pilot

The Air Pollution Control Board met June 7 in Richmond and voted 4-3 to leave the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. (Katie King/The Virginian-Pilot)

By [IRÈNE MATHIEU](#) and [NEELU TUMMALA](#) | Guest

Columnist

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A lawsuit has been filed by the [Southern Environmental Law Center](#) to keep Virginia in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, also known as RGGI. As physicians who know how much climate change endangers public health, this is an action we welcome.

The realities of our changing climate became glaringly obvious this summer. In June, I (Irène) looked up from dressing my daughter to see an orange sun rising outside the window. My phone confirmed my suspicions – the air quality index, or AQI, was well above 100. Typically the AQI in Central Virginia during the summer remains below 50, in what is considered an acceptably healthy range. This is thanks to [improved air quality](#) from the [Clean Air Act](#), which was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support starting in 1970.

But now, record-breaking Canadian wildfires, [intensified due to human-caused climate change](#), were releasing harmful pollutants into the air. That day, the daycare created their first ever air pollution policy – a document to guide teachers in making decisions about when to limit or forego outdoor play based on the severity of air pollution.

Ironically, it was during that June week wildfire smoke first blanketed our homes that Gov. Glenn Youngkin also declined to renew our participation in RGGI.



Passed by the Virginia General Assembly in 2020, [RGGI](#) is a market-based approach that is designed to reduce harmful power plant pollution. This approach was developed by Republican George H.W. Bush as a market-based strategy to reduce pollution, and it proved extremely effective in reducing [acid rain](#). It was then adopted by New York's Republican Gov. George Pataki as a way to reduce carbon pollution.

After only two years of participation, Virginia saw a 16% decline in emissions from power plants. This decline in pollution improves air quality and helps combat climate change, which improves the respiratory, cardiac and mental health of Virginians. Apart from the health benefits, the funds earned through participation have been used for much-needed weatherization assistance, including helping local communities protect against flooding – another environmental disaster made more likely by climate change.

The filed lawsuit states that the Virginia Air Pollution Control Board, [which voted 4-3 to withdraw](#), does not have the authority to end Virginia's participation in RGGI. The Air Pollution Control Board, with a majority of members appointed by Youngkin, voted for withdrawal despite that the majority of public comments were opposed to the withdrawal.

Not only is the withdrawal unlawful, as outlined in the filed lawsuit, but it also exemplifies the prioritization of the financial health of the fossil fuel industry over the actual health of Virginians. [Newly appointed members](#) of the Air Pollution Control Board who voted against RGGI have ties to the fossil fuel industry. We need climate-conscious politicians who recognize that climate change is a major threat to human health.

Two months after that fateful week in June, the daycare was creating yet another new policy – one related to heat illness prevention – as [record temperatures scorched the country](#). While we are glad to see schools rising to the challenge of protecting children from the effects of climate change, we shouldn't have to live this way. Virginia must continue to participate in RGGI. It is essential to ensuring a livable future for all our children – not one wracked by wildfires, floods and deadly heat waves.

The climate crisis is not some potential future outcome – it's happening here and now. All of us who care about human health should be asking our politicians the same question: What are you doing to stop our climate from changing?

Irène Mathieu is a pediatrician and an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Virginia. Neelu Tummala is an ENT physician and a clinical assistant professor of surgery at George Washington University. They both serve on the steering committee of [Virginia Clinicians for Climate Action](#).



Irène Mathieu



Neelu Tummala

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