Speaking Faithfully About Climate Harm and Responsibility

Polluters Pay To Make NJ Affordable Act
(aka New Jersey Climate Superfund Act)
Message and Action Guide for Faith Leaders

Purpose of this resource

The NJ State legislature must pass critical climate legislation now: the Polluters Pay To Make NJ Affordable Act. Fossil fuel companies have enjoyed massive profits from selling oil and gas in New Jersey. As a simple matter of fairness, this bill would require them to pay a portion of the cost of climate-related damage which communities statewide have suffered. Currently, taxpayers and municipalities are paying all of the cost.

Funds would be used to repair damaged infrastructure, for climate resiliency projects to mitigate against future harms, and to assist communities harmed by climate-induced storms, heat and flooding. A substantial percentage of these funds would help communities hit hardest by climate change – including the state's cities. The bill allocates 51% of the funds for overburdened, environmental justice communities (an official designation from the NJ Department of Environmental Protection).

GreenFaith invites faith leaders and communities around the state to offer leadership and take action to support this important bill using the enclosed resources. We also call on faith communities to contact their legislators, urging them to support the bill. See more guidelines for action at the end of this resource.

This guide is written for you, as faith leaders, to support your preparation of sermons, teachings, or public messages. It is not a script. It offers moral framing, pastoral emphasis, and sample stories and messages that you can adapt to your religious setting.

Overview

This op ed offers an introduction to the bill. Written by several faith leaders, it sets forth an introduction to the topic.

In the 2024-2025 legislative session, the bill garnered support from the faith community, elected officials, statewide groups, unions, farmers and the public. A statewide poll found 68% of New Jerseyans want big oil companies to pay for the impacts of climate change.

Despite the momentum and support, Craig Coughlin, the Speaker of the NJ Assembly, refused to schedule the bill for a vote during the last legislative session. The bill has been re-introduced in the 2026-2027 session and renamed *Polluters Pay To Make NJ Affordable* (S2338/A3735). The NJ climate justice movement is pushing for a rapid passage and signing by Gov Sherrill on Earth Day April 22, 2026.

Support for Sermons, Qhutbah, Dvar Torah, Dharma Talks

The following is a guide to help spiritual leaders to communicate about this topic with their communities,

Begin with a Story of Harm Here in New Jersey

You may wish to begin by reflecting on how we usually speak about harm.

If violent crimes occurred in our neighborhood and we spoke only in terms of stolen property and crime statistics, we would rightly feel something essential was missing. Communities need to know about injured neighbors – their suffering and fear, the days spent in intensive care, the weeks of missed work, the financial strain, and the anxiety of walking our streets again.

Yet, when it comes to climate-related harm, this is not how we usually speak. Instead, we cite statistics, averages, trends, projections, and cost estimates. Too often, injuries, illnesses, suffering, displacements, and disruptions experienced by real people remain hidden and unrecognized.

As religious leaders and communities, we can and must change this. Sharing stories is an effective and important place to start. Here are three New Jersey stories that make the human cost of climate change very real.

- **Plainfield flash flooding (July 2025): A social outing became a sudden catastrophe**

  In Plainfield, flash flooding turned familiar streets into fast-moving water. Two women in their 60s, Lubia Estevez and Forest Whitlock were on their way to a local Bingo game. They drowned when their car was swept into Cedar Brook near Stelle Avenue, despite efforts by a good Samaritan to help. Climate-intensified downpours don't simply damage property. They can take beloved neighbors in moments. News story here.

- **Elizabeth during Ida (September 2021): when homes became traps**

  As the remnants of Hurricane Ida passed through New Jersey, families in Elizabeth faced terrifying flooding that killed at least 23 across the state. At Oakwood Plaza, floodwaters rose to eight feet. Four residents were found dead in the aftermath. It is impossible to speak about "storms" in the abstract when we remember apartments filling, doors jammed, and families losing loved ones - right here in New Jersey. News story here.

- **Newark's children: unsafe to breathe**

  Climate harm in New Jersey isn't only dramatic floods. It's also the extreme heat and air pollution from burning fossil fuels that worsen air quality and intensify the suffering of children with asthma. In Newark, 1 in 4 children has asthma, far above the national rate. This ongoing harm shows up in missed school days, hospital visits, and exhausted parents forced to miss work to protect their children. News story here.

Along with Florida, California and Texas, New Jersey is among the most climate-vulnerable states in the country. This article describes why. But beyond statistics and figures, our faiths teach us to name suffering honestly, not to sensationalize it but to recognize our neighbors' suffering and to honor it by calling for a better future.

Naming Responsibility Without Partisanship

Climate-related harm is not accidental misfortune, nor a "natural" disaster. *Unnatural* disasters are the foreseeable result of human and corporate decisions. This is not assigning partisan blame. It is a sober-minded moral judgment.

For decades, the fossil fuel industry has generated enormous profits from selling fuels burned to heat homes, power industry, and move cars and trucks, while hiding their own scientific evidence that the resulting pollution and climate instability damages public health, infrastructure, and ecosystems. This harm does not evaporate or disappear. The costs of these damages are passed on to families, communities, municipalities, and taxpayers.

This is a matter of moral accountability, not political identity. When harm is foreseeable and preventable, ignoring responsibility allows injustice to persist.

Religious Teaching: Grounding Responsibility in Faith

In addressing this topic, no new values are being introduced. Long-standing faith teachings and moral responsibilities are being applied to present realities. Across traditions, we find shared moral commitments:

- responsibility for harm caused
- protection of the vulnerable
- repair where damage has been done
- responsible stewardship of the environment
- accountability for the powerful who cause harm to others

The following is a simple, non-exhaustive collection of sacred texts and teachings relevant to climate protection and the responsibility of the powerful to protect the common good.

Judaism

1. **Genesis 2:15** — Humanity is placed in the garden "to **till and to keep**" it: stewardship, not extraction.
2. **Bal tashchit** (Deuteronomy 20:19–20) — The Torah forbids needless destruction; later Jewish teaching broadens this into an ethic against waste and destruction that harms the community.

Christianity

1. **Genesis 2:15** — God entrusts creation to human care: protection and tending, not domination.
2. **Romans 8:19–23** — Creation "groans," awaiting liberation: a spiritual warrant to hear ecological suffering and work toward healing and restoration.

Islam

1. **Qur'an 30:41** — "Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of what people's hands have earned": a call to recognize human-caused harm and return to right action.
2. **Qur'an 7:31** — "Eat and drink, but **do not waste**": an ethic of restraint, responsibility, and rejecting excess that harms others.

Hinduism

1. **Atharva Veda, Bhumi Sukta (Hymn to Earth, 12.1)** — Reverence for Earth as living, sustaining, and worthy of protection; gratitude demands restraint.
2. **Bhagavad Gita 3:14–16** — A vision of interdependence (rain, food, life) and human duty (dharma) to uphold the conditions that sustain society.

Buddhism

1. **Non-harming (Ahimsa) / Compassion (Karuna)** — Core teachings direct us to reduce suffering for all beings; climate action becomes an expression of compassion at scale.
2. **Interdependence (Pratītyasamutpāda)** — Because all life arises in relationship, harming ecosystems inevitably harms people—especially those with the least protection—calling for wise, collective responsibility.

Unitarian Universalism

1. **Seventh Principle** — "Respect for the **interdependent web** of all existence": a direct spiritual mandate for climate protection.
2. **Second Principle** — "Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations": grounds the moral claim that those with the most power and profit-bearing responsibility should help repair harms borne by others.

From these teachings, a simple moral truth emerges. When harm is foreseeable and preventable, and when costs fall on the vulnerable, responsibility follows.

Final Moral Framing: The Climate Superfund Act Is a Faithful Response

As faith communities, we can and must apply our religious teachings to concrete public issues without crossing into partisan advocacy. This important bill represents such a moment.

The New Jersey Climate Superfund Act is not punitive. It is reparative.

The Act requires the world's largest fossil fuel companies, those that profited while knowing the harm they were causing, to contribute to repairing climate-related damage across New Jersey. The bill allocates 51% of the funds for overburdened, environmental justice communities (an official designation from the NJ Department of Environmental Protection). Funds will support flood mitigation, resilient infrastructure, clean water, cooling strategies, and disaster preparedness, especially for communities at risk of repeated harm.

This reflects a universal moral principle: when harm is caused, responsibility follows.

In speaking out, we must remember that public policy is a legitimate expression of moral responsibility, justice, and care for the vulnerable. Moral witness in public life is not the same as political allegiance. It is a vital expression of our faiths.

Guidelines For Taking Action

- **Sign the faith leader letter of support for the Climate Superfund Act. Join your 186+ New Jersey colleagues.**
    - Please add your signature here. Read the letter and see the signatures here -- the letter is "view only", use the form to sign the letter.
- **Pass a congregational Resolution in support of the Climate Superfund Act.**
    - Sign the faith Resolution form here.
- **Preach a sermon on climate justice using this resource.**
- **Invite your Green Team / Creation Care / Environmental Justice Ministry to get involved.**
- **Contact Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin to urge him to support the bill and schedule it for voting. Identify yourself as clergy.**
    - Trenton Assembly office: 732-855-7441
    - AsmCoughlin@njleg.org
- **If you have a relationship with any NJ state Senator or Assemblymember, let's discuss how you can help.**

For more information and support, contact:
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