TALK'M Up

What Folks Are Missing About The Climate Conversation In the Deep South

In February 2026, The Climate Equity Fund supported leaders from Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, Kentucky, and Mississippi (TALK'M).

We asked them three questions about climate, civic participation, and racial equity.

Their answers revealed something national funders often miss: Some of the country's most important climate, democracy, and racial equity battles are unfolding in places that rarely receive national attention.

Climate Change Is Already Reshaping Communities

- Climate change is not a future concern in the Deep South.
- Kentucky has experienced 23 federally declared disasters in just 13 years.
- Mississippi has become home to climate migrants displaced by disasters across the region.
- Birmingham, Alabama is home to the nation's single largest source of greenhouse gas pollution.

Climate Is a Democracy Issue

- Across all five states, leaders pointed to the same challenge: communities often have little say in decisions that directly affect their lives.
- Many Alabama residents don't realize the officials responsible for regulating utility rates are elected.
- Tennessee continues to rank near the bottom nationally in voter participation despite rising public concern about energy affordability and utility costs.
- When people understand who makes decisions about energy, infrastructure, and disaster recovery, climate becomes a civic participation issue.

Climate Is a Racial Equity Issue

- The communities facing the greatest environmental burdens are often the same communities facing longstanding barriers to political and economic power.
- In Louisiana, industrial facilities are concentrated on former plantation lands where descendants of enslaved people continue to live today.
- In Memphis, predominantly Black neighborhoods face significantly higher energy burdens than the national average.
- In Louisville, predominantly Black communities experience higher levels of pollution and lower life expectancy than wealthier parts of the city.

One Shared Lesson

Across Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, Kentucky, and Mississippi, leaders arrived at the same conclusion:

Lasting climate progress requires community power.

Climate, racial equity, and democracy are not separate issues. They are deeply connected.

And the future of all three is being shaped right now across the Deep South.

Let's TALK'M Up

The CLIMATE EQUITY FUND	What is one way that your state is a part of a larger climate / clean energy conversation?	What aspect of civic participation could be energized by connecting it to local climate/ clean energy efforts?	....and how could addressing this issue help advance racial equity in your community?
Tennessee	Congressional District 5 is served entirely by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the nation's largest public power utility, which is federally owned and governed.	Despite population growth, Tennessee ranks near the bottom nationally in voter registration and turnout. Rising energy costs create an opportunity to connect climate issues with civic engagement and activate underrepresented voters.	Climate and clean energy investments in Tennessee can reduce disproportionately high energy costs, particularly in Black communities that face some of the state's highest energy burdens.
Alabama	Home to the nation's largest greenhouse gas polluter, a distinction it has held for nine consecutive years. Jefferson County has also received an "F" grade from the American Lung Association for ozone pollution.	Alabama residents face some of the nation's highest electricity bills, a significant burden in one of the country's poorest states. Yet many are unaware that the elected Public Service Commission has direct authority over utility rates and oversight of Alabama Power.	Alabamians face the nation's highest energy burden, with Black and low-income communities disproportionately impacted by high electricity costs, lower incomes, and less efficient housing.
Louisiana	The fourth-largest carbon emitter in the U.S. and ranks fifth in per-capita carbon emissions.	In Louisiana's River Parishes, often called "Cancer Alley," Black voter turnout approaches 90% in many elections, driven by the stakes facing local communities and sustained investment in organizers and community leaders.	Much of Louisiana's industrial development sits on former plantations where descendants of enslaved people still live today, leaving these communities disproportionately exposed to pollution and emissions.
Kentucky	The sixth most climate-vulnerable state and experienced 23 federally declared disasters in 13 years, costing taxpayers more than $1.5 billion.	Many Kentuckians distrust a system they view as favoring corporate interests, creating an opportunity for organizers to use climate and clean energy issues to reengage voters, particularly following recent devastating floods.	In Louisville, predominantly Black neighborhoods face higher pollution and lower life expectancy, highlighting the opportunity to build multiracial power around shared climate and environmental challenges.
Mississippi	Climate displacement has shaped Mississippi's population. Since Hurricane Katrina, the state has become a destination for people displaced by climate disasters, leading movement organizations to pair mutual aid with civic engagement to support and organize climate migrants.	Mississippi has one of the nation's highest voter registration rates, but turnout remains limited by a long history of voter suppression. Connecting climate impacts to government accountability and civic participation is key to building lasting climate power.	With nearly 40% of Mississippi's electorate identifying as Black and growing Latino, AAPI, and Indigenous communities, strengthening multiracial collaboration is key to building a more representative and responsive democracy.