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BONNIE ERBE: This week on *To the Contrary*, first, environmental racism, what is it and does it exist? Then, behind the headlines: poison in your sofa called flame retardants.

(Musical break.)

MS. ERBE: Hello. I'm Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to *To the Contrary*, a discussion of news and social trends from diverse perspectives. Up first, the climate justice gap.

(Begin video segment.)

MS. ERBE: Climate change may be a global problem, but the NAACP reports it disproportionately affects women, people of color, and lower income communities. That's why the NAACP launched the Climate Justice Initiative.

JAQUI PATTERSON [Director, NAACP Climate Justice Initiative]: Communities of color tend to have these preexisting vulnerabilities so that when something like a disaster happens, there's communities that have, you know, poor housing stock or who are underinsured or are politically marginalized. And all those factors combine to make a greater vulnerability to the impact of disasters.

MS. ERBE: Scientists believe climate change may be one of the leading factors responsible for the increased frequency of natural catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina and super storm Sandy. Women exposed to natural disasters and manmade environmental toxins are more vulnerable, experiencing higher rates of health problems. Patterson says the impact is even worse for women of color.

MS. PATTERSON: An African-American family making \$50,000 a year has more likely lived next to a toxic facility than a white family making \$15,000 a year. So then you have situations where, when disasters happen, which are only increased because of climate change, then these facilities become yet another hazard for those communities.

MS. ERBE: Patterson says poor communities haven't contributed as much to climate change because they don't have the resources to buy luxury houses, yachts, or cars. Climate Justice calls on women to take the lead in fixing the problem and connecting lower income and minority communities with the green economy.

MS. PATTERSON: There's a lot that can happen in terms of real community level action. We're working with communities on how they can implement some of these models that we talked about, transitioning from fossil fuel energy, moving to zero waste types of models, adapting local food movements and local food economies, all of these different ways. But then also to influence the policies that are going to help to govern and to make sure that we do have the type – the standards of living that we need

to have from having air that's free of toxins and also reducing the impact of these pollutions on driving climate change.

(End video segment.)

MS. ERBE: So Avis Jones-DeWeever, is there such a thing as environmental racism or environmental justice?

AVIS JONES-DEWEEVER: Of course, there is. Anytime you find that in every city in this nation African-Americans are much more likely than whites to live in areas where there are high concentrations of air toxins, I don't think there can be anything but that.

JENNIFER MARSHALL: Justice is about right relationships among people and with the world around us. So, yes, that includes proper stewardship of the environment. We need policy to put people first as our most precious and unique resource and to inspire people to be good stewards of the environment.

AMANDA TERKEL: Environmental policies – I mean, studies have shown that environmental policies affect economic, racial, gender disparities. And more attention needs to be paid to that.

RINA SHAH: I think tackling this problem of climate change and people of color is a very delicate one because we've got to tackle it in such a way where it doesn't adversely affect them with more than just what we think. We've got to talk about the manufacturing sector. Disproportionate numbers of Latinos and African-Americans live on the edges of inner cities, where there are great many manufacturing jobs. And we've got to talk about that.

MS. ERBE: All right. Let's start with – and I want to spend some time really getting into the concept of environmental racism. I mean, do you think white people are consciously trying to put people of color in – you know, in neighborhoods where they're closer to waste dumps or landfills or that sort of thing?

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: Well, I don't think there's a big white conspiracy going on here. And I don't think racism necessarily has to be intentional or institutional. And what happens is that people who are more well endowed economically are better able to lobby for themselves and for their neighborhoods to be able to say, not in my backyard.

But for people who are more economically vulnerable, who are disproportionately people of color, it's harder to have that same sort of political might to protect your neighborhoods in that way. And so, as a result, you end up with situations where you do have high concentrations of people of color who are economically vulnerable and environmentally vulnerable.

MS. ERBE: But is that more a matter of race or of class? Because there's surely plenty of poor white people living in those neighborhoods as well, as we saw in that explosion with that plant in Texas, fertilizer plant. There are plenty of white people living right near that plant.

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: That is true, but there's also a lot of studies that suggest even when you take out the economic factor and hold that constant, race still seems to be a driving force behind who tends to be more vulnerable in terms of being physically closer to different environmental hazards that creates a system where they might become more likely to have a source of illness, such as asthma, for example.

When you have black folks who are much more likely to have asthma, much more likely to die or be hospitalized because of it, it's oftentimes because of where they live and what's near them in terms of their neighborhood environments.

MS. ERBE: Do you agree?

MS. MARSHALL: So the question is, if those most vulnerable are most likely to be susceptible to environmental hazards, how can we incent the choices in a society that will bring about better environmental standards generally?

And, unfortunately, the recourse towards regulation, towards regulation that would monitor – cut down on greenhouse gases, for example, would disproportionately hurt the most vulnerable. Here's why. The average family in America spends about a nickel on energy. The low-income family spends about 20 cents on the dollar on energy. And those below the poverty line, 50 cents on a dollar towards energy costs.

Whenever there are regulatory schemes that try to address greenhouse gases, which haven't been shown to have this direct relationship that's often claimed to climate change, then we see a disproportionate effect on the poor. So we've got to be coming up with solutions that aren't going to hurt the poor as a byproduct.

MS. ERBE: But let – before we switch the question, let me – do you think there's some kind of racial difference and racial motivation behind the fact that – that forces the fact that there are more people of color living closer to environmentally toxic places or that they're more affected by environmental toxins?

MS. MARSHALL: No, I don't. I think it's – it is an issue of vulnerability in society and we need to look at the factors that are most salient, most important to making sure that we don't – that we can be tackling vulnerability where it exists, wherever it exists in society.

MS. TERKEL: I mean, I think a lot of this is also political power. People – minority communities often tend to be more in poverty than white communities. And people who are poor tend to have less of a voice, whether it's to lobby in Washington or if there is a plant going up next to their – in their town, nearby, who's going to complain?

Are they going to go to Washington, lobby and complain? Are they going to be able to get into the media as – you know, when Senator Ted – late Senator Ted Kennedy was upset about wind farms going off the coast? You're not going to hear from those people.

And that's why a lot of times, like let's put something there, because it's an open space, no one is going to complain. It increases asthma. A lot of this is happening in urban areas, which is where more minorities tend to live. And so – and a lot of these people are affected more too because they already don't have enough access to health care, for example. So these sort of changes in the climate, these toxic plants that are going up will affect them more.

MS. SHAH: I certainly think as a – as a woman from West Virginia and a woman of color, it's very difficult for me to answer the question about what's right, what is really perfect to help tackle this problem head on. When people rely on things such as coal, it's a livelihood. They've been in coal for generation, yet, they realize what the coal industry may be doing to them, both good and bad. And it presents a really – a real conundrum for them.

So as someone looking at it from that angle, I have to say, let's go back to individual responsibility and helping empower people to raise their voices. And fostering more public and private partnerships, because the reality is that no public institution, not private company is really going to do what's best for the citizen. It's going to have to be a combo of many things.

MS. ERBE: So do you think the resolution lies entirely within the realm of giving more lobbying power and lobbying clout to poor communities?

MS. SHAH: Perhaps a little bit more, but the answer is how? How do you go about that when we, in these great 50 states, we've got different dynamics. So I really think let's talk about individual responsibility, but let's talk about public-private partnerships, fostering those, so going from the top down in a different way. We can't rely on government to do everything for us, but we can certainly look to build partnerships that have never existed in places such as my home state. So that's what I'd like look at more.

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: But individual responsibility is tempered by what options one has available to them and what options one – frankly, do not have available to them.

If you look at what happened, for example, with Katrina, the reason why you had a place like the lower ninth ward, which was in fact a very vibrant community, frankly, a very economically diverse community but a largely black community; totally leveled as a result of the flooding that went on there when the levees were breached.

What you had here was a long history then, frankly, of residential segregation that existed in that city, which made it difficult for African-Americans of various incomes to

be able to buy homes in more high-lying areas. That's a reality, even to this day. I mean, there are studies that suggest that steering continues to go on. So we haven't really sort of broken this nut in terms of residential segregation that impacts people's lives.

MS. ERBE: So what's the solution, in your mind?

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: That means that we need to do a lot more as a nation about getting real, about what are some of the real barriers that we face. We need to have significant enforcement of laws to make sure that when discrimination occurs, it is in fact acknowledged, and there are repercussions behind it. Until we do that, we're really not going to be able to address not only this issue but so many issues that are based, that are tied to where you live, what sort of foods do you have access to, what sort of schools do your children have access to. All of those things are tied to where you live. It impacts your lives at several different levels.

MS. ERBE: All right. And thank you, Rina, for joining us for this part of the show. Very nice job.

Let us know what you think. Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe or #tothecontrary.

Behind the headlines: women and, of all things, flame retardants. Most people would agree that adding chemicals to prevent furniture from catching fire would be a good thing. But research is showing these chemicals do more harm than good. The EPA recently decided to test 20 chemicals under the Toxic Substances Control Act, specifically flame retardants.

Arlene Blum is a scientist who has spent her entire career blazing a trail toward a ban on flame retardants in furniture. Her science shows they create serious health hazards.

(Begin video segment.)

ARLENE BLUM [Founder, Green Science Policy Institute]: We found a little girl whose mom had bought her pajamas in England so she'd never wear flame retardant pajamas treated with Tris. We put her in Tris pajamas. We collected her urine and it contained Tris breakdown products. So then we tested Tris to see if it changed DNA, was it a mutagen. And it was one of the strongest mutagens we'd ever seen.

So then we wrote a scientific paper saying that the main flame retardant in children's pajamas was a mutagen and could cause cancer possibly and should not be used. And three months later, Tris was banned from children's pajamas.

MS. ERBE: Arlene has been a pioneer in the field of flame retardant research. Without her, Tris might still be widely used.

LINDA BIRNBAUM [Director, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences]: Arlene Blum is really a force of nature. Arlene is very effective and very dedicated to addressing not as much the specific risk of flame retardants but knowing that they may have – certainly have the potential to cause health effects. She has been focusing on the issue of do we need them and looking at why their amounts increased so much.

MS. ERBE: After a long campaign to ban Tris in the U.S., Arlene Blum took a few years off. But in 2007, she was thrust back into flame retardant research by an incident that took place in her own home.

MS. BIRNBAUM: In about the mid-2000s, she became very concerned about her cat, who had hyperthyroid disease. Now, hyperthyroidism in cats was never reported in the veterinarian literature until the late 1970s. And Arlene began to wonder, as in fact I did, was there an association between the increasing levels of the flame retardants and the increase in hyperthyroidism in cats.

MS. BLUM: Having high levels of a chemical that's known to be problematic in people's homes that end up in their bodies is not a good idea. So why add very harmful chemicals to our homes and our bodies when there's no benefit?

MS. ERBE: The answer has to do with California's fire safety regulations.

MS. BLUM: It turns out California is the only state in the country that has a Fire Safety Bureau. The only two places that develop standards are California and the federal government, the Consumer Product Safety Commission. And, usually, California developed standards first and then they can be adopted by the federal government.

MS. ERBE: So California sets the standard essentially for all furniture made or sold in the U.S. In California, that standard is called Technical Bulletin 117. It requires couch cushions to resist small flames for 12 seconds. But Arlene says the standard is flawed.

MS. BLUM: If you drop a candle on your couch, the fabric will burn first. And when the fabric burns, there's a large flame. The foam will burn maybe in two or three seconds. And when foam burns in the presence of flame retardants, it gives off a lot more such smoke, carbon monoxide, and other toxic acids, and makes the fire more dangerous.

MS. ERBE: I asked Arlene Blum to demonstrate where those toxic chemicals hole up.

So where exactly in the sofa cushion are the flame retardants hiding?

MS. BLUM: Well, they're in the foam. But they're not exactly hiding. And it's a kind of chemical that's continually coming out and then it drops into dust. So we're actually exposed through hand to mouth contact with dust.

MS. ERBE: How can someone in their home tell if there's flame retardant in their – in their furniture?

MS. BLUM: Unfortunately, there is no readily available test. If they live in California, there is for sure. If they live outside California and their furniture was purchased, say, in the last 10 years, probably about 95 percent of the new furniture contains it.

MS. ERBE: There are three types of flame retardant in furniture: Penta, Chlorinated Tris, and Firemaster. Scientists have very little data so far on Firemaster.

MS. BLUM: Now, the manufacturers really don't want scientists to study Firemaster, but one scientist got a small sample of Firemaster, fed very low doses to mother rats. And the babies were very obese and anxious. So it looks like Firemaster is what's called an obesogen and causes anxiety.

MS. ERBE: Penta is one of the chemicals banned by the Stockholm Convention, an international environmental treaty whose members ban or restrict the use of toxic chemicals. The U.S. is a signatory. Chlorinated Tris is the same mutagen in children's pajamas.

MS. BLUM: In the case of Penta, there are many hundreds of animal studies showing neurological, reproductive, thyroid, and endocrine harm. But there are studies in humans that when a woman has higher levels of Penta in her body, it takes here quite a bit longer to get pregnant, men have lower sperm count. So it's reproductive, neurological, endocrine, thyroid, immune problems.

MS. ERBE: Today, Arlene spends her time traveling the country. She speaks to manufacturers, retailers, consumer groups, and regulatory agencies, trying to ban these substances. Despite all this, she still faces roadblocks.

MS. BLUM: The big problem in America is that our government does not have the authority to protect us from toxic chemicals in products.

MS. ERBE: But Arlene's hard work may soon pay off in what could be the greatest achievement of her career. California has proposed a new standard for flame retardants in furniture.

MS. BLUM: About a year ago, this came to the attention of Jerry Brown, the governor of California. And he's taken a leadership role in instructing the bureau that's responsible for the standard to change the standard so we can have increased fire safety without the chemicals. The new standard, if everything goes well, should take effect in

October. And that means people will be able to buy furniture that has increased fire safety without flame retardants.

(End video segment.)

MS. ERBE: So, Renee Sharp of the Environmental Working Group, very nice to have you on the panel. You live in California.

RENEE SHARP: Absolutely.

MS. ERBE: Do you expect this change in the – in the standards to go through? And how will that affect Americans generally?

MS. SHARP: Well, we're certainly hoping it goes through. We have our work cut out for us honestly. The chemical industry has spent a total of \$23.2 million lobbying against this change. So that's been quite a force to overcome.

But if we do see this change, what we expect to see is we expect to see the levels of fire retardants in our bodies drop. Right now, EWG has tested women's breast milk. We tested umbilical cord blood. So babies are being born with these chemicals already in their body before they've been in the world and been exposed. We've also found that children have higher levels of fire retardants than their mothers, three times as high, because they are down on the ground; they're putting their hands in their mouth; and they're ingesting these at higher levels.

So what we're – what we're expecting is to see is if these standards go through, we're going to see the levels in our bodies drop. And, eventually, we're also going to be all healthier.

MS. ERBE: Your thoughts.

MS. MARSHALL: I think this is a parable in the unintended consequences of regulation. You saw the California regulation with regard to fire retardants. And these are the unintended consequences of that. So I think this is – as we're having this show that's focusing on environmental issues, it's very, very critical that we think through any consequences and the cost effectiveness of any regulation that's trying to get at problems like these.

MS. ERBE: So what? You're saying we shouldn't have regulated flame retardants in the first place?

MS. MARSHALL: I'm saying you've got to count the cost and that – and weigh this. And so Arlene Blum is exposing something. Let's not air in the other way, and 10 years from now, we'll be worrying again about, you know, couches catching on fire. So it's a seesaw back and forth and we have overreacted in a whole scope of regulations back and forth. And we've got to count the costs more carefully about that.

MS. JONES-DEWEEVER: You know, this was shocking to me. I'm embarrassed to say that I did not know about this danger before finding out about this particular program that we're having today. And I'm so glad to know now.

But I'm afraid to say that, you know, to say that the answer is to have less regulation, that to me seems so counter to common sense. The bottom line is that we need to know what the dangers are and then we need to make sure that we have rules in place so that more families aren't exposed to this danger.

To think that children, before they even take their first breath in this earth, are exposed to these chemicals frightens me. I mean, what are the long-term effects? What is – what will happen to that child neurologically? You know, so many other ways. We need to figure out ways in which we can make sure that we have systems in place to stop these problems once we're alerted to them.

MS. ERBE: Well, let me ask you this. It seems like we're on the cusp or we have been for the last decade or so of finding that all these chemicals, manmade chemicals that were introduced because they had positive effects or – like flame retardants, like Tris, we're now seeing that, no, there are all these negative effects. It's not true of just flame retardants. We're talking about BPA, Bisphenol A, and plastics that is supposed to be causing all these – you know, all of these physical problems related to too much estrogen in the system. Are we on the cusp on some major trend here that we're going to find that a lot of these chemicals are harmful to us?

MS. SHARP: We're not on the cusp. We're already there, unfortunately. The fact is that the chemical policy in this country is just fundamentally broken. And, honestly, it's been broken from the start. In 1976, the Toxic Substances Control Act was passed. It's never been updated. And in that law, chemicals – and get ready, this is really shocking – are not required to be tested for safety before they are put on the market.

So people think, I go and buy a drug, OK, that's been tested for safety. You go and buy a couch, you go and buy a cosmetic, the fact is that – that's a different law – the fact is that those products, most of those chemicals have not been tested for safety because our chemical policy is broken. We need to fix it and not have a system where chemicals are innocent before proven guilty.

MS. ERBE: OK. So how, what do you mean fix it? Should the – and I think of like Roundup, or, you know, very popular insecticides, those things on the market, you know, scare me, quite frankly. And so none of these things have been – have been tested?

MS. SHARP: So Roundup is a pesticide. And under federal law, pesticides actually do have to be tested. But most chemicals, like fire retardants, do not have to be tested.

And so by fixing it, I mean making sure that chemicals actually go through a battery of tests before they go on the market so we don't end up with a situation where down the line we realize, oh, my God, these are causing health problems, and, instead, we prevent the problem to begin with.

And the second thing that we need to fix is the fact that if the EPA discovers that a chemical that is on the market is in fact toxic, it's really difficult under current law for the EPA to get that chemical off the market. So we also need to fix that.

MS. TERKEL: I mean, that is a big part of the problem. I mean, the EPA doesn't have really have the authority it needs to get these off the market. And it's also not really doing enough with the authority it has. If it determines that a chemical could harm someone, it could order more studies, although those don't have to be done before the product goes on the market, but it doesn't do that enough, which is why in this case, it seems like the answer is going to the states, going to California, where something legislatively can be done because the EPA right now is not an effective place for that to happen.

MS. ERBE: All right. And that's it for this edition of *To the Contrary*. Thank you for joining us. Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe and #tothecontrary. And visit our website, [pbs.org/tothecontrary](http://pbs.org/tothecontrary), where the discussion continues. And whether you agree or think to the contrary, please join us next time.

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