Our Environment, Our Health and You.

When we think of environmentalists, we often think of people who compost their trash, drive hybrid cars or study up on climate change. But the truth is that environmentalism is something much broader. When EPA was formed in 1970, it was tasked with protecting human health and the environment. For 40 years, we have worked to safeguard the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the lands where we build homes, schools and businesses. Keeping Americans healthy is a priority we share with the National Black Nurses Association. That's why I believe our nation's nurses are also some of our most active and important environmental advocates.

If you've ever treated a patient with asthma, and warned them about high ozone levels on hot days – that's environmentalism. If you've counseled a pregnant mother about how chemicals can affect their child – that's environmentalism. If you've written a paper about lead in water, talked about how climate effects the movement of diseases, or researched the connections between bio-accumulative chemicals and cancer – that's environmentalism. Every day on the job, you show Americans that the environment is part of everyday life, and that environmental protection is vital to our health and the health of our communities.

For four decades EPA has led the fight to make our environment cleaner and our communities healthier – and we've seen some incredible progress. Dangerous pollution in the air we breathe is down by more than half. Lead pollution – one of the most harmful threats to us and our children – has been reduced by 90 percent from a generation ago. Using Clean Water and Safe Drinking Water laws, communities across the country have safe, clean water to drink, to swim in, and to give to their children.

We have all benefitted from cleaner air, water and lands. But our work – mine and yours – is more important today than ever.

We need your help because heart disease, cancer and respiratory illness – all linked to environmental causes – remain three of the top four most fatal health threats in America. They account for more than half of the deaths in the nation. And all three have an overwhelming impact on black communities.

We need your help because Blacks visit the emergency room for asthma at three-and-a-half times the average rate that whites do, and die from it twice as often. Mortality rates for cancer are higher for us than for any other group and heart disease is the most fatal illness in the black community. As nurses on the frontlines of health care in America, you have seen the effects that battling these diseases can have on individuals and their friends or family members.

These environmental health challenges don't travel alone. Areas where asthma rates are highest are often the same places cancer and other illnesses are found. According to a recent study, exposure to airborne soot pollution – itself a major cause of asthma – almost doubles a person's likelihood of dying from heart disease.

An unclean environment not only impacts the health of our communities, it also has holds back economic growth and future prosperity. There are costs to small businesses that pay higher health insurance premiums because their workers are at greater risk of chronic diseases caused by pollution in their community. There are costs to employers in lost productivity from employees calling in sick. There are costs to our future when students get ill because we've built schools in polluted areas.

When environmental degradation keeps businesses from investing, economic possibilities are limited. Without those economic possibilities, crime and violence can take hold, drug use can grow, and the vicious cycle continues. What have we taught our young people to value and take pride in when they see that their communities are unclean, unhealthy and unsafe – and that the people around them seem unconcerned?

As we begin a new chapter in the history of the EPA I hope you will continue the work you are doing as nurses – and environmentalists. If we all do our part, Americans 40 years from today will look back and remember this generation as one that helped build a cleaner, healthier future for everyone.