

September 19, 2024

Dear President Tarver and leaders of the Monterey, California Branch of the NAACP,

I wish I was writing you under better circumstances. It brings me no pleasure to raise a complaint about actions taken by the leadership of my hometown NAACP branch.

Having been born and raised in Monterey County, I was trained as an organizer by members of this branch. My experiences with them-- even more than my family's six-generation tradition in the organization-- is what taught me to love the NAACP. It also set me on a trajectory to ultimately become the youngest national head of our storied organization. I have always respected my home branch and answered the call whenever one of its leaders asked for help in any way. Moreover, I am proud that my mother, father, and grandmother have all been honored at past Monterey County Branch events for their courageous contributions to the NAACP's cause.

So you can imagine how thrilled I was to be invited to deliver the keynote address at this weekend's Freedom Fund Banquet. And you can imagine how heartbroken I was to have that invitation revoked in order to protect the comfort of the event's sponsor – Chevron.

When I received a request from the Branch to censor my remarks and not “voice a point of view that might make Chevron uncomfortable,” that was one request I had to refuse.

My mentor, the revered former national chairman of the NAACP Julian Bond, would roll over in his grave if I yielded to such a request. To say he was proud to join me in launching the NAACP's climate justice program as my first major act as national president would be an understatement. After all, Chairman Bond's final act of civil disobedience was chaining himself to the White House fence in opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline at the invitation of Bill McKibben and then Sierra Club Executive Director Mike Brune.

Further, acceding to such a request would violate my integrity as the head of the Sierra Club, the nation's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization, not to mention as the former CEO of the NAACP itself.

My and Julian's activism in both organizations is not unique in our community, nor our country. As we all know, there is a long tradition of activists in Monterey County being active in both the NAACP and the Sierra Club. This is a trend that is common across the country. It is for good reason. Our

interests in both social justice and environmental protection overlap. This shared commitment is reflected in the Sierra Club's history of defending voting rights and the NAACP's longstanding commitment to environmental and climate justice.

I celebrated the bond between Sierra Club and the NAACP at a Freedom Fund dinner in South Carolina last weekend. Despite the oil and gas industry having significant interests in that state there was no similar concern about my delivering the keynote address.

Suffice to say, the action taken by the Monterey County Branch sets a dangerous precedent. It also dredges up an unfortunate rift within the NAACP community from a few years ago.

In 2019, it came to light that some NAACP chapters were accepting donations from fossil fuel-aligned utility companies and then taking positions against climate friendly policies. The [New York Times reported](#), "When utilities around the country have wanted to build fossil-fuel plants, defeat energy-efficiency proposals or slow the growth of rooftop solar power, they have often turned for support to a surprisingly reliable ally: a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People."

While I do not know that the Monterey County Branch is joining Big Oil's efforts to undermine environmental protections in Monterey County and across the state of California, there is no question that preventing the head of the Sierra Club from addressing the Branch aids and abets such activities.

The real danger in the precedent being set by the Monterey County Branch's actions is demonstrated by what the fossil fuel industry has done to Black communities across this country. When I was national NAACP president, we put out a report mapping the places most likely to be impacted by climate-related disasters: low-income communities and communities of color regardless of income level. It showed that communities of color – particularly Black communities – are most affected by the devastating health impacts of air and water pollution from the burning of fossil fuels.

Big Oil appears not only to be trying to use a relationship with the NAACP to publicly absolve itself of this history, but to enlist an ally in their agenda. At the time Chevron became the Freedom Fund Banquet's sponsor, a ballot initiative backed by Big Oil and Gas was slated to be in front of California voters this November. It was aimed at [repealing a recently passed law](#) prohibiting new oil and gas wells within 3,200 feet of homes, schools, nursing homes, and hospitals and beefing up health, safety, and environmental requirements. Big Oil [pulled the initiative from the ballot](#) in June when it was evident they would not win.

Of course, many of the wells and potential wells in question would be in areas of California like Inglewood and Baldwin Hills in Los Angeles – communities with many Black residents. A 2021 [study of two South Los Angeles drilling sites](#) by USC found people who live near them experienced significant lung damage from the toxic emissions.

Chevron itself successfully sued to overturn the will of Monterey County voters when state courts rejected voters' authority to limit oil and gas drilling under the previously passed Measure Z ballot initiative. Now a bill sits on Governor Newsom's desk that would effectively reinstate Measure Z and the authority of local residents to reject the oil and gas wells that harm their health impacts, pollute their air and water, and decrease their property values. Chevron and other Big Oil and Gas companies obviously oppose the measure.

For chapters and branches to accept fossil fuel blood money and then oppose clean energy initiatives – or insist their event honorees and speakers not cause “discomfort” to the industry that is killing our planet and our people – is a betrayal of the entire mission of the NAACP. And it is a betrayal of chapters' obligation to be good stewards of a revered brand. Carrying the banner of the NAACP is a privilege and a responsibility. And, this week, my beloved Monterey County Branch failed at that.

When Big Tobacco attempted to leverage donations to the NAACP in the 1990s, then-president Kweisi Mfume enacted a policy of no longer accepting donations from tobacco interests. We maintained that and similar policies when I was president and habitually returned checks that violated it or otherwise threatened to compromise our integrity or reputation. I humbly request the Monterey County Branch do the same with this check from Chevron.

Black people are among the most acutely harmed by the climate crisis. For the NAACP to accept money and influence from the very perpetrators of that crisis makes a mockery of its more-than-a-century-old mission to secure our advancement. Once again, the Monterey Country Branch should return Chevron's check immediately.

Respectfully yours,

Ben Jealous