

*Today, Representative Quigley spoke on the House floor about the need for a National Energy plan and the need to protect the Clean Air Act. A video of his speech is below, followed by a transcript.*

Madam Speaker, it wasn't many years ago that coalminers relied on a small bird – a canary – to signal that conditions were toxic. The canary in the coal mine would become sick before the miners, who would then have a chance to either escape, or put on protective respirators.

Today, our ecosystems face dire threats. Toxic gasses, chemicals and the exploitation of our natural resources have jeopardized our air, water, lands and the wildlife that inhabit our ecosystems.

The telltale sign? The frog, the “canary in the coal mine” of our natural environment, is sick. Today, nearly 33% of amphibian species are threatened, and estimates of species extinctions over the past several decades number in the hundreds. Losses of these species result from the usual suspects: land-use change, exploitation and disease.

Why all the emphasis on frogs? Aside from the fact that these animals regulate their local ecosystems, and control populations of insects that spread disease, they are important to our human health as well. Findings point the way toward new drugs for fighting diseases such as cancer and HIV-AIDS. Scientists have reportedly found chemicals that are naturally produced in the skin of various frog species that can kill the HIV virus.

But these medicinal tools are disappearing – and at astronomical rates. That should tell us something. A frog's skin is relatively thin and permeable to water, so frogs are directly exposed to pollutants such as coal ash, and environmental radiation. In addition, their eggs are laid in ponds and other bodies of water where they absorb chemicals. The frog, the “canary in the coal mine” of our natural environment is first in line in an environmental pollution war. A war the frog is quickly losing.

If we don't heed this call, much like the miners who relied on their singing canary, we are destined for illness, and ultimately, shorter, healthier lives. Sadly, this degradation of human health and quality of life is already happening across the country.

Colstrip, Montana is home to the second-largest coal plant west of the Mississippi: one boxcar-full of coal is burned every five minutes. The burning coal contains sodium, thallium, mercury, boron, aluminum, arsenic which is pumped out of the factory and into the air. The chemicals that aren't pumped into the air are caught in the factory's scrubbers and then dumped with the coal ash into giant settling ponds. These ponds are shallow artificial lakes of concentrated toxicity which leached this poison into wells and aquifers. The sludge flows into the surrounding towns and countryside, bubbling up against foundations and floorings, cracking the floor in Colstrip's local grocery store.

Ranchers in east Montana are now suing the plant for damages; noxious water, they cite, is the only liquid that fills their wells and stock ponds. James Hansen, a renowned climate scientist, says Colstrip will cause the extinction of 400 species.

But Colstrip burns on. Why? Because, we have no national energy plan. And, because there are currently no federally enforceable regulations specific to coal ash. This lack of federally enforceable safeguards is exactly what led to the disaster in Tennessee, where a dam holding more than 1 billion gallons of toxic coal ash failed, destroying 300 acres, dozens of homes, killed fish and other wildlife, and poisoned the Emory and Clinch Rivers.

From Tennessee to Coalstrip, and across the nation, the story is the same: we have no national conservation plan, no national energy policy, no regulatory reinforcement powers. And, the biggest environmental disaster the country has ever faced – the Horizon Deepwater Oil Spill – has not propelled Congress any further toward passing a cap-and-trade bill through both chambers. Senator Reid said they were side-stepping a cap-and-trade bill for oil response legislation, but we haven't seen that either.

Worse, as we mark 40 years of cleaner air under the Clean Air Act, it is heartbreaking that we must now fight to protect this monumental law from attack. Some in Congress are considering weakening this landmark law, seeking to bail out polluters who continue to lobby for loopholes and giveaways that put America's health and safety at risk.

We are poisoning our ecosystems, our animals, yes, our frogs. But, we are also poisoning our families, our communities, our nation and our entire world.

If we do not heed this canary's song, we will only have ourselves to blame. And by the time we take notice – it may be too late.

Thank you, and I yield back.