

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The Fair Treatment and Meaningful Involvement of All

Why the Environmental Justice Program Is Important

Across the country, adults and children who live in low-income areas and communities of color are disproportionately affected by polluted air, water and land. They too often live, work and attend a school near sources of harmful environmental contamination – factories and power plants, highways and congested roads, lead-contaminated urban buildings and hazardous waste sites. From cities to rural areas to Tribal lands, our poorest communities and people of color suffer serious health problems related to regular exposure to hazardous substances in their environments.

- Poor children may face the greatest risk from polluted air, water and land. Black children are nearly twice as likely to have asthma as their white counterparts, and nearly half of America’s Latinx population lives in counties that do not meet EPA air quality standards.
- Children living in more than six million sub-standard housing units nationwide are exposed to conditions in their homes that contribute to lead poisoning, asthma and other serious respiratory problems.
- Many families living along the U.S.-Mexico Border and in Alaskan Native Villages still lack basic sanitation and safe sources of drinking water.

The EPA Environmental Justice program promotes an environment in which all people enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process. The program facilitates the integration of environmental justice into all EPA programs, policies and activities.

How the Environmental Justice Program Works

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed an Executive Order on environmental justice to promote non-discrimination in federal programs substantially affecting human health and the environment, and to provide minority and low-income communities access to information and opportunities for involvement needed to address their environmental and public health problems. In fiscal year 2015, 35% of EPA enforcement cases addressed violations of federal rules and regulations in communities with environmental justice concerns. The EPA Environmental Justice program:

- Fosters public health in overburdened communities by integrating environmental justice into EPA programs and policies as part of its day-to-day business and supporting agency efforts to address environmental disparities;
- Focuses attention on problems affecting low-income communities and communities of color such as unsafe drinking water, poor air quality, exposure to contamination from hazardous waste sites, harmful pesticide exposure on farms and in homes, lead in older buildings and drinking water pipes;
- Encourages community participation in decisions that may affect people’s health and consideration of community concerns in the decision-making process;
- Provides grants to support and empower communities as they develop and implement solutions to environmental or public health problems at the local level; and
- Offers technical assistance and training to help communities better understand the science, regulations and policies that guide EPA’s decision-making.

Consequences if the Program Is Eliminated or Inadequately Funded

- Adults and children living in low-income communities and communities of color would lose EPA's assistance in helping them tackle the significant disparities in pollution experienced in their communities compared to wealthier white neighborhoods.
- EPA would be seriously limited in its ability to identify and address disproportionately high environmental burdens in the communities that have historically borne a larger share of environmental harm and are particularly vulnerable to environmental and public health threats.
- Communities most affected by environmental injustice would be less likely to receive the fair treatment and opportunities for meaningful involvement established by the 1994 Executive Order on environmental justice.
- EPA would lose the expertise needed to fully integrate environmental justice into its policies, programs and decision-making.

Demonstrated Successes

The EPA Environmental Justice Small Grants Program and the Collaborative Problem Solving Cooperative Agreement Program have assisted over 1,400 communities in better understanding and addressing environmental and public health problems. The funding from these small grants has been used successfully to leverage significant funding from other sources for problem-solving, cleanups and education. The following are a few highlights of the program's successes:

- Spartanburg, South Carolina, received a \$20,000 environmental justice grant to address contamination in this low-income African American community burdened by six brownfields, two hazardous waste sites and an active chemical manufacturing site. Spartanburg ultimately raised more than \$270 million from public and private sources and used the recovered land to build housing, a job training facility and health centers, creating jobs and reinvigorating the community.
- The communities of El Conquistador, Lourdes Estates and Agua Dulce, Texas, which have no municipal wastewater systems, were burdened by poor water quality from a high number of failing septic systems. Through an Environmental Justice Small Grant, Familias Triunfadoras, a local non-profit organization, trained more than 190 residents about septic system maintenance, organized cleanups that removed 15,000 pounds of trash and tires, and educated the community about the health risks of polluting irrigation canals.
- In Tonawanda, New York, residents had been exposed for years to toxic air pollution from the Tonawanda Coke Corporation plant, which supplies raw materials for steel production. Air monitoring revealed high levels of benzene in the air from the plant. EPA provided grant funds to the local Clean Air Coalition and supported the community's efforts to force the company into compliance. These efforts ultimately led to a criminal case by EPA against Tonawanda Coke Corporation that required the company to significantly reduce its benzene emissions and resulted in a \$12.5 million fine and jail time for the plant's environmental manager. In fiscal year 2015, 35% of EPA enforcement cases addressed violations of federal rules and regulations in communities with environmental justice concerns.

Funding for Environmental Justice Enforcement

FY2016 Baseline Budget: \$7.282 million

FY2017 President's Budget Proposal: \$15.903 million

FY2017 Amount Appropriated: \$7.268 million

FY2018 President's Budget Proposal: \$0 million

FY2018 Amount Appropriated: \$7.245 million

FY2019 President's Budget Proposal: \$2 million

FY2019 Amount Appropriated: \$7.495 million

FY2020 President's Budget Proposal: \$2.739 million