

TESTIMONY OF
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Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the work we are doing at the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), and across the Biden-Harris Administration, to improve the health of the environment in which Americans live, learn, work, pray, and play.

Last month marked one year since I was confirmed by this body, and since then my staff and I have been working, on behalf of the President, to find common sense solutions to the environmental challenges that families are facing in their daily lives—from toxic chemicals that are seeping into their drinking water to the dangers of worsening fires, floods, and storms.

In my travels over the past year, I heard from residents of Detroit’s 48217 zip code—one of Michigan’s most polluted areas—who live in the shadow of multiple industrial plants and are coping with pollution upon more pollution being loaded into the air they breathe.

I spent time in Louisiana where I saw the extraordinary impact of coastal restoration projects that are helping rebuild the health and productivity of the Mississippi River delta, restoring livelihoods to fishing communities that depend on these wetlands, and protecting homes and communities from increasingly more intense storms and flooding.

And I saw the remarkable work that the Yurok Tribe is doing to conserve and restore California’s redwood forests, to better protect these old forests and nearby communities from catastrophic fires, and create more habitat to rebuild salmon and steelhead stocks.

I have also been fortunate to meet with many of you to understand your priorities as I work side-by-side with our agencies to help deliver cleaner air, water, and lands to the American people. The work we have begun to do over the past year has been an honor, and I thank the President and you for placing your faith in me.

While our work at CEQ is expansive, my testimony will focus primarily on: the bipartisan work and accomplishments of this Committee and Congress, in partnership with the Biden Administration; the steps CEQ is taking to advance efficient and effective permitting of transformational clean energy and infrastructure investments; and the critically important work that lies ahead.

Bipartisan accomplishments and partnership

President Nixon once said, “Clean air, clean water, open spaces—these should once again be the birthright of every American.” He later went on to sign into law the Clean Air Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, which created the organization I am honored to chair today. Indeed, the mission of safeguarding clean air and clean water has long been a shared American value.

While our work is far from done, I applaud this Committee’s leadership in tackling these important issues. In a short time, this Committee led the development of historic bipartisan legislation that will phasedown hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), a greenhouse gas hundred to thousands of times more potent than carbon dioxide. In addition, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which makes transformative investments in our clean energy future, includes major policies that were unanimously supported in this Committee. Those policies include major investments to get lead out of America’s drinking water, clean up the nation’s most contaminated lands, and deploy the electric charging infrastructure, electric buses, and other clean and affordable transportation options that consumers want and need.

The impacts of these investments are not abstract; they are helping Americans here and now.

For example, thanks to Congress and the President teaming up to pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, every Superfund site that has been part of the backlog will now be cleaned up using that funding. Some of these sites have been waiting for years, and all too often they are located in low-income communities and communities of color. These sites include a neighborhood in Florida with soil contaminated from treating wooden telephone poles, a former copper mine in Maine laced with leftover metals, and an old steel manufacturer in southern New Jersey where parts of the Golden Gate Bridge were fabricated. The cleanup of these sites is now possible because of you.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, investments are being made today to help secure electric buses and replace older buses that have exceeded their useful life. This is part of a broader effort supported by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to fund 70 projects in nearly 39 states. Together, we are securing cleaner air for children and thousands of bus drivers who breathe polluted air on their rides to and from school. We will create good jobs along the way in advanced manufacturing and in clean energy.

Advancing efficient and effective permitting

There is a long history of taxpayer dollars being wasted on poorly designed projects: of buildings built in flood plains, and then washed away; of Black and brown neighborhoods being bulldozed to make way for a new highway, without their voices and perspectives being heard.

There is also a history of delays that can slow and discourage projects and investments: of agencies using complicated processes; of documents that get backed up in understaffed offices.

These are some of the reasons why CEQ was proud to recently finalize a narrow rulemaking that will restore clarity to the environmental review process by affirming that agencies need to assess direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of decisions and projects. In addition to bringing the rule

back to long-standing practice and procedures, our changes ensure the investments in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law can be made more efficiently and with the appropriate public engagement.

Our expectation is that the rule will not cause delays to projects. In fact, by reducing conflict and litigation, it will likely result in projects getting completed faster, not slower. And the rule we implemented keeps in place recently established timelines for completing environmental reviews.

We are also working to ensure that key offices responsible for these reviews are appropriately staffed so that there aren't pinch-points in the process. The President's budget request for Fiscal Year 2023, for example, requests additional resources for Section 7 consultations at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA, so that projects requiring Endangered Species Act consultations receive timely attention.

Areas of focus for continued partnership

In addition to the progress that the Administration and Congress are making to modernize America's infrastructure and build a clean energy future, I want to highlight two areas that deserve additional attention and focus.

First, we must stay laser-focused on ensuring that every single person in America has clean water to drink, clean air to breathe, and a healthy environment in which to live, learn, work, play, and pray. Yet—still—these essentials are out of reach for too many people. Communities of color, economically disadvantaged communities, Tribal Nations and indigenous peoples, and rural communities are shouldering a disproportionate share of the nation's pollution burden and climate change risks.

That is why the President has made the pursuit of environmental justice central to his environmental and climate agenda.

Through the Justice40 Initiative, we are working to ensure that the benefits of Federal climate and clean energy programs reach communities that have been left out for far too long. At CEQ, we are developing a Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool that, based on pollution data and climate risks, helps identify which communities are disadvantaged and should be prioritized under the Justice 40 program.

I am also proud of the work that the Administration is doing to ensure that the voices of communities with environmental justice concerns are heard at all levels of government. We have created the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Committee, composed of community leaders and environmental justice experts, to help provide input on the Administration's whole-of-government approach to environmental justice.

At CEQ, we have created our own first-ever environmental justice program, and several other agencies are expanding and strengthening their own environmental justice programs.

We need Congress's continued help as well. The provisions in the proposed Build Back Better legislation, for example, would help clean up and reduce carbon emissions in the power and

transportation sectors. The bill would also invest \$3 billion into Environmental Justice and Climate Justice Block Grants. These grants will support community-led projects that address environmental and public health harms related to pollution and climate change. The legislation would also expand low-income housing, strengthen public transit, and cut the pollution that threatens our water and air.

In addition to confronting environmental justice, we must do more to confront the decline of biodiversity. For our country to be healthy and prosper, we need nature. It supplies the clean air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat.

For that reason, I am grateful for the progress this Committee and Congress are making in conserving and restoring America's lands, waters, and wildlife. I applaud the Committee for your focus on developing legislation that will help recover America's imperiled wildlife and to build on America's proud, bipartisan stewardship traditions.

Through the President's America the Beautiful Initiative, the Administration is also committed to doing everything we can to support locally led conservation efforts across the country—from helping make Federal conservation grants and programs more accessible to states, Tribes, private landowners, and local communities to partnering with western governors to conserve major wildlife migration corridors.

Conclusion

CEQ is hard at work delivering on the President's commitment to protect our health, our environment, and our communities. The investments that you—Congress—have made are helping us ensure the benefits of a cleaner environment for all Americans for generations to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to our continued partnership and welcome any questions you may have.