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Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice, and
Regulatory Oversight

Examining Current Issues Adversely Affecting Environmental Justice Populations

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Chair Merkley, Ranking Member Wicker, and Members of the Committee:

Good Morning. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Environmental Justice. I am delighted that the Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice, and Regulatory Oversight is being reconfigured to include this urgent topic. I am a Professor at the University of Oregon and have been studying environmental justice for over 30 years. I first became interested in the environment growing up in Los Angeles and not being able to see the mountains due to the smog. I still remember the stench and burning in my lungs as a child. More recently, I moved to Oregon because southern California is growing increasingly hot and I suffered from extreme heat sickness. Today I would like to provide a brief introduction to Environmental Justice research and highlight some of today's most pressing issues.

Environmental Justice refers to the fact that people of color and low-income populations in both urban and rural areas are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards. Environmental Justice is also the name of the movement that has arisen to challenge such injustices. The term Environmental Equity, often used by federal and local governments, implies the fair or equal distribution of environmental hazards and benefits. The environmental justice movement demands equity, but also advocates for addressing the systematic causes of vulnerability, whether that is poverty, racism, colonization or other forms of disenfranchisement.

Environmental Justice trace its origins to the late 1980s. Several key events precipitated it, including protests in rural North Carolina against the dumping of PCB; farm worker struggles against pesticides; Native reservations dealing with uranium waste; urban communities opposed to incinerators; and rural residents lacking access

to clean water. These struggles often drew on previous movements, including the Civil Rights Movement, worker struggles, Indigenous rights, and the anti-toxics movement, to name but a few.¹ In 1987 the United Church of Christ conducted the first national-level study of uncontrolled hazardous waste sites and their proximity to various demographic groups. Researchers found that people of color were disproportionately exposed to toxic waste, what is called, Environmental Racism.² Of course, environmental injustice did not begin in the 1980s, we just previously lacked the language to name it. Since then, Environmental Justice has had a major impact on the larger environmental movement and has changed how we see many environmental problems.

I would like to briefly highlight some of the pressing Environmental Justice challenges facing us today that require action.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative Impacts refers to the need to take into account multiple forms of pollution and vulnerability that impact geographic communities. Almost all policy and permitting systems treat polluters individually while disregarding the cumulative impacts of industrial concentrations. This has produced a major mismatch in terms of public health and regulatory policy. For example, near the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles there is an epidemic of childhood asthma, which is due both to the logistics industry as well as factories. California has begun to tackle this. Scholars have developed proto-types which the California Air Resources Board and other agencies are testing.³ These tools enable individuals to identify the multiplicity of risks in a given place. Such tools need to be refined and applied across the country.

Climate Change & Heat

We know that low-income and communities of color are the most vulnerable to climate change. They are vulnerable because they have fewer resources and capacity to respond to heat, cold, drought, and flooding, especially compared to wealthier populations.⁴ The end result is higher levels of death and displacement. This past summer in eastern Oregon the temperature hit a record 118 degrees. Historically cool places like the Pacific Northwest were simply not built for such temperatures. In urban areas there are significant differences in heat. Wealthier places tend to have more trees and shade than poor places, which led to a 25-degree temperature difference in parts of Portland.⁵ In places like Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina, it is the poorest who are most impacted by hurricanes and flooding, as we saw in Hurricane Katrina or

in South Carolina in 2015. Exacerbating the situation is recent evidence that FEMA relief is far more likely to go to wealthier residents and home-owners, versus low-income populations and renters.⁶ Immediate resources need to be directed towards increasing shade, weatherization projects, sheltering the unhoused, managed retreat, building a more reliant and sustainable energy system, and revising FEMA policies.

Water Access

As a wealthy country we assume that access to clean, potable water is not an issue, but that is untrue, especially in rural areas. Sometimes this is due to people getting disconnected from the utility, such as in Flint after the contamination crisis. But rural communities are disproportionately impacted by both water quality and access. For example, the Navajo Reservation, spanning both Arizona and New Mexico, has one of the highest proportions of households without plumbing in the U.S.⁷ In parts of Appalachia there are communities that have had boil water advisories for over five years. Indeed, in some parts of West Virginia, less than half the structures are linked to central sewer systems.⁸ These problems are exacerbated by climate change and require immediate investments in infrastructure to provide these communities with clean, potable water.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions.

¹ On the origins of the movement, see Luke Cole and Sheila Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York University Press, 2001; Tracy Perkins, *Evolution of a Movement: Four Decades of California Environmental Justice Activism*. University of California Press, 2021.

² United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. See also Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Westview Press, 1990; Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha, and Beverly Wright, *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007*. United Church of Christ, 2007.

³ The CalEnviroScreen can be found at <https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen>. It has been suggested as a possible national model. See also, James Sadd, Manuel Pastor, Rachel Morello-Frosch, Justin Scoggins, and Bill Jesdale (2011) "Playing it Safe: Assessing Cumulative Impact and Social Vulnerability through and Environmental Justice Screening Method in the South Coast Air Basin, California" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8 (5): 1441-1459.

⁴ Susan Cutter, Kevin Ash and Christopher Emrich (2016) "Urban and Rural Differences in Disaster Resilience" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 106 (6): 1236-1252.

⁵ Sophie Peel (2014) "This is the Hottest Place in Portland" *Willamette Weekly*, July 14; Jason Samenow and Ian Livingston (2021) "Canada Sets New All-time Heat Record of 121 Degrees Amid Unprecedented Heat Wave" *The Washington Post*, June 29.

⁶ Christopher Flavelle (2021) "Why Does Disaster Aid Often Favor White People?" *The New York Times*, June 7.

⁷ Shiloh Deitz and Katie Meehan (2019) "Plumbing Poverty: Mapping Hot Spots of Racial and Geographic Inequality in U.S. Household Water Insecurity" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 109 (4): 1092-1109.

⁸ Will Wright, Caity Coyne, and Molly Born (2018) "Why Many in Central Appalachia Lack Reliable, Clean Water" The GroundTruth Project, December 16,
https://thegroundtruthproject.org/stirring_the_waters_appalachia/