

**TESTIMONY OF
HELENA WOODEN-AGUILAR
DEPUTY ASSOCIATE ADMINISTRATOR
OFFICE OF POLICY
U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
HEARING ON ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND CIVIL RIGHTS**

**BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

November 20, 2019

Good Morning Chairman Tonko, Ranking Member Shimkus, Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member Walden, and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Helena Wooden-Aguilar and I am the Deputy Associate Administrator for the Office of Policy at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. My responsibility as the career lead in the Office of Policy is to work with our EPA colleagues to support agency priorities and enhance decision-making throughout EPA's programs.

I have served at EPA for more than 15 years in several roles related to environmental justice and civil rights, including as the Deputy Civil Rights Official in the Office of the Administrator. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on EPA's work to fulfill the purpose of the Executive Order 12898 and achieve our core mission of protecting human health and the environment, including for vulnerable and overburdened communities across the United States.

Overview of Office of Environmental Justice

The role of EPA in environmental justice is rooted in Executive Order 12898, *Federal Actions to*

Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, which is still in effect today. Executive Order 12898 directs each covered executive department and agency, including EPA, to promote and achieve environmental justice as part of its mission.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Executive Order. Some of our more recent accomplishments in this area include the following:

The elevation of the Office of Environmental Justice into the Office of Policy within the Office of the Administrator. We took this step last year to ensure that environmental justice is considered throughout all EPA programs. This move strengthened and complemented our environmental justice work with the activities of our Office of Community Revitalization (formerly the Office of Sustainable Communities), which is also located in the Office of Policy.

This decision was motivated by this Administration’s interest in placing the Office of Environmental Justice in a position that would maximize the agency’s ability to improve coordination across EPA’s programs and with our federal partners.

We also launched the Environmental Justice and Community Revitalization Council, also known as EJCRC, to provide high-level, cross-agency direction and decision-making for environmental justice priorities. The EJCRC focuses on advancing the use of community-driven solutions across the agency to achieve tangible results in communities by building upon EPA’s current investments, expertise, and partnerships.

EPA’s Strategic Plan recognizes that a strengthened community-driven approach will make EPA a better partner and more responsive to the needs of the communities in the work we do daily.

We will continue to provide technical assistance and meaningful engagement to economically distressed communities, including Opportunity Zones, thereby fostering economic growth and environmental protection. Opportunity Zones are a tool that environmental justice communities could use to leverage private investment in economically distressed communities, bringing both economic revitalization and environmental improvement.

I am pleased to highlight that, in late October, EPA announced the selection of 26 organizations to receive a total of \$5.1 million in Brownfields grants for environmental job training programs across the country. All 26 organizations will serve communities located in Opportunity Zones. In addition, our Brownfields program provided substantial grant funding to help communities revitalize brownfields sites, recognizing that putting these properties back into use creates many economic and environmental benefits throughout communities. In FY 2019, EPA provided more than \$60 million in Brownfields grant funding to communities across the country to assess, clean up and redevelop underutilized properties.

Under this Administration, EPA's Office of Environmental Justice has issued \$3.9 million in grants in the form of Small Grants and Collaboration Problem Solving Cooperative Agreements. In FY2019, EPA prioritized projects focused on disaster resiliency and emergency preparedness. Sixteen of the FY 2019 EJ grantees are leading projects focused on building the resilience of their local communities to these natural disasters. Earlier this month, on November 5th, EPA awarded \$1.5 million in grants to 50 organizations across the country working to address environmental justice challenges in their communities. Fifty percent of those grants will support

communities located in Opportunity Zones.

Just last week, on November 13th, EPA announced the availability of \$1.2 million under the Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving program. These funds will be distributed to ten community-based organizations nationwide working to address environmental justice issues in underserved and overburdened communities. This grants program requires that communities work in collaboration with multiple partners from different stakeholder categories such as local government, business and industry, and academia. EPA will be accepting applications from interested organizations until February 7, 2020.

The Office of Environmental Justice also partners with the External Civil Rights and Compliance Program, or ECRCO. For example, we have coordinated with ECRCO on several occasions with respect to the investigation and resolution of civil rights complaints brought under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Both the Office of Environmental Justice, along with ECRCO, together have provided training and technical assistance to approximately 40 state agencies and organizations, as well as local agencies and tribes, across all ten EPA Regions, on how to proactively address civil rights obligations and environmental justice.

GAO Recommendations and Implementation

EPA serves as the chair of the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice, also referred to as the EJ IWG. In this role, we facilitate collaboration among federal departments and agencies.

Over the past two years, we have been engaged with the Government Accountability Office on their review of EPA and the Executive Branch's fulfillment of the purpose of Executive Order 12898. Past GAO recommendations have been very helpful in supporting our efforts to continually increase our knowledge and capacity to advance environmental justice in agency programs and activities.

Their most recent effort focused on EPA's role as the chair of the EJ IWG, and on the activities of EJ IWG member agencies to integrate environmental justice into their programs and activities. We have very much appreciated the level of engagement, communication, and thoroughness we experienced with GAO staff throughout their work.

We agree that implementation of these recommendations will help strengthen the ability of the EJ IWG and its member agencies to strategically prioritize, measure, and evaluate their success at integrating environmental justice considerations into their programs and activities. EPA will provide leadership during this process and all decisions and products will be the result of a collaborative process involving all EJ IWG members. We aim to complete this work by the end of Fiscal Year 2020.

Conclusion

EPA recognizes that the EJ IWG still has work to do, and we are committed to addressing the recommendations made by the GAO. With EPA at the helm, I am confident that we will be able to address all the open recommendations and concerns identified by the GAO.

In addition to the highlights I have shared today, our core work in environmental justice continues and the progress could not be achieved without our dedicated and talented staff here at the EPA who are working hard to improve outcomes in communities across the country and ensure that they have a cleaner, healthier and more prosperous future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to take any questions you may have.

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