



Department of Environmental Management

Environmental Justice Policy

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Empowering Communities | Protecting Our Environment | Connecting People

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (hereinafter “DEM” or “Department”) has developed this environmental justice (hereinafter “EJ”) policy to guide all programs within the Department. This EJ policy has been created by DEM but will be a dynamic document evolving based on feedback from local community groups, businesses, elected officials, faith communities, and Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities of Rhode Island. This policy represents DEM’s ongoing commitment and dedication to the State of Rhode Island and the people who live within its communities who are often disproportionately impacted by environmental issues and lack of access to natural resource opportunities.

Definitions

"Environmental Justice (EJ)" means the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, English language proficiency, or income with respect to access to the state’s natural resources and the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

“Fair Treatment” means no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental, and commercial operations or policies, and should have equal access and opportunity to enjoy the states natural places.

“Meaningful Involvement” means people have an opportunity to participate in decisions about

activities that may affect their environment and/or health, the public's contribution can influence the regulatory agency's decision, community concerns will be considered in the decision-making process, and decision makers will seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.

"Environmental Justice Focus Area" is a census tract that meets one or more of the following criteria:

- annual median household income is not more than sixty-five percent (65%) of the statewide annual median household income,
- minority population is equal to or greater than forty percent (40%) of the population,
- twenty-five percent (25%) or more of the households lack English language proficiency, or
- minorities comprise twenty-five percent (25%) or more of the population and the annual median household income of the municipality in which the proposed area does not exceed one hundred fifty percent (150%) of the statewide annual median household income.

Protecting Our Environment

All Rhode Island residents, regardless of income, race, ethnicity, or national origin, have a right to live in a clean and healthy environment. DEM strongly believes that no community should be burdened with adverse environmental and public health consequences. As a result of Rhode Island's industrial history and heritage, many communities in the state are disproportionately impacted by environmental and public health risks. Many of Rhode Island's EJ focus areas are particularly afflicted by pollution from numerous industrial, commercial, and governmental facilities located in their neighborhoods. Additionally, these same communities often lack opportunities to access the states open spaces to recreate and enjoy nature. Residents in many of these overburdened communities have also suffered from an increase in adverse health effects, such as asthma, cancer, and increased exposure to hazardous substances, among other issues. It is in the interest of the State and its people to limit and eliminate harmful pollutants which are often disproportionately found in and around facilities located near overburdened communities and to provide these communities equal opportunity to recreate and enjoy in the state's natural places, which also has known health benefits.

Empowering and Serving Environmental Justice Communities

DEM, through this EJ policy, intends to use data, resources, and information to empower the residents in Environmental justice focus areas to influence policy. A key element of empowering communities is building capacity and supporting efforts for all communities to have meaningful involvement and effectively participate in conversations and decisions about environmental issues of interest. These issues are wide ranging in nature and should be thought of to include access to the state's abundance of natural resources, not just protection from environmental harms. This will assist in problem solving and improve the natural and economic conditions across all of Rhode Island's neighborhoods. Generally, the idea of community empowerment is synonymous with the idea of effectively engaging with community groups to build improve and rebuild the quality of life of overburdened neighborhoods. Not one organization or group is able to do this alone, rather it takes the strength and the will of those who live in those respective communities working with organizations and agencies, including DEM.

For the benefit of all Rhode Island communities and their people, DEM will seek to create and build partnerships to help shape, promote, and deliver key environmental services and provide opportunities for people in EJ focus areas to actively take part in shaping the economic, physical, and environmental future of their communities. Building these partnerships is essential to successfully promote environmental health, community health, and individual health. With effective collaboration between DEM staff members and community stakeholders the Department will seek out and support important opportunities for multi-directional learning and lessen the existing informational disparities between DEM and the overburdened communities.

The most effective partnerships with DEM are designed to strengthen existing and future relationships and create alliances and often extend to assistance and problem-solving in a wider context. To this end, DEM will collaborate with environmental and community organizations across the state with the broad goal of achieving clean air, land, environment, and healthy, sustainable communities for all Rhode Islanders.

DEM Commitment Statement

DEM is committed to protecting, restoring, managing, and promoting Rhode Island's environment and natural resources to preserve and improve the quality of life of all its people. In doing so, DEM's ongoing obligation is to incorporate EJ considerations into all the Department's programs, policies, and activities, and elevate important environmental issues that have a significant impact on EJ focus areas. DEM will work with local government and community partners to assist with ongoing efforts towards diversifying DEM's workforce by identifying top talent, permanent and summer job placement, and internship opportunities. Taking these important and intentional steps will support DEM's commitment to strengthen the Department and better serve and reflect the needs of communities.

DEM will continue to monitor, adjust, and improve the effectiveness of this environmental justice framework as it is implemented. This is an evolving policy and changes will be made to ensure consistency and effectiveness with the stated goals across the Department.

In summary, the goals of this policy are:

- To ensure that pollution does not have disproportionate negative impacts on any group of people or community,
- To encourage restoration and development in overburdened areas that balance the needs of residents, municipalities, and the redevelopment community,
- To make informed decisions and improve work quality through collaborative efforts and build mutual understanding and trust between the Department and the public it serves,
- To support all communities in their efforts to be prepared for and resilient to the effects of climate change, as well as ensuring that negative effects are minimized with any future development,
- To provide DEM staff with proper training to better understand the characteristics of the communities that are most vulnerable to environmental injustices and associated health challenges,

- To increase awareness throughout Rhode Island, particularly in Environmental Justice focus areas about environmental justice and the steps needed to be implemented to address this issue,
- To provide a clear and effective process for ongoing communication and understanding of any actions taken by DEM, especially pertaining to environmental justice concerns,
- To facilitate opportunities for all residents to have meaningful involvement and participate in environmental and climate change decision-making,
- To maintain communication with a wide variety of people and organizations who have an interest in the development, implementation, and monitoring of environmental justice policies by facilitating viewing this policy and issues through multiple lenses,
- To guide DEM staff and direct the Department's decisions and public involvement process in such a way that encourages timely and effective community participation.
- To provide residents living and working in overburdened communities with clear communication networks through which they can participate in environmental decision-making regardless of race, income, national origin, or English language proficiency.
- To provide residents living and working in overburdened communities access to safe and healthy natural resources to ensure nature is within reach of all.
- To help provide investors and developers operating in overburdened areas a clear, predictable process for interacting with both DEM and communities impacted by redevelopment projects.

Striving to address inequities in EJ focus areas across Rhode Island is an ambitious and long-term effort that can only be achieved through the implementation of measurable goals and meaningful community involvement. This policy will guide development of strategies to integrate environmental justice principles into DEM's daily practices. As the DEM Strategic Plan is updated, and program work plans are developed, the principals identified in this policy will be put into action across the Department.