

TWENTY-EIGHT REGULAR SESSION OF THE CEC COUNCIL
10 September 2021
Online

2021 CEC COUNCIL PUBLIC SESSION – SUMMARY RECORD

Welcoming Remarks and Introduction of Video on CEC’s Accomplishments by the Executive Director

The CEC Executive Director, Richard Morgan, opened the meeting by welcoming the public as well as the representatives from the three countries, and by presenting the theme of the session as well as a short video showcasing the accomplishments of the CEC in recent years. He then invited the Council representatives to say a few welcoming remarks, starting with Michael Regan, Administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Chair of the 2021 Council Session.

Remarks by Council

Administrator Michael Regan stated that he appreciated the participants’ flexibility in joining the event virtually and would have wished to meet in person in North Carolina. He recognized that this was the first public meeting since the entry into force of the new trade agreement and that it was a pivotal year for the EPA and the United States. He then highlighted how the US President Joe Biden had pledged to tackle climate change at home and abroad, and to protect public health and the role of science. Finally, he shared his excitement for the Operational Plan projects and stressed the CEC should be proud of its accomplishments despite the pandemic.

Mexico’s Alternate Representative Iván Rico said it was an honor to represent Secretary of Environment María Luisa Albores González at the public meeting. He also praised the broad and relevant work done by the CEC despite the pandemic and stressed how the organization was able to reach concrete results toward achieving the Parties’ shared goals. He further highlighted the important role of youth as part of this 28th Council Session and emphasized that ensuring the right of citizens to a healthy environment is part of Mexico’s Constitution.

Canada’s Alternate Representative Catherine Stewart expressed her pleasure in being at the meeting and the honour it represents. Speaking from Ottawa, she recognized she was on traditional, unceded and unsundered territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation. She said that Minister Wilkinson sent his regrets for not being able to participate in the meeting, explaining that Canada was currently in an election campaign and that government officials must show restraint during election periods. She reiterated Canada’s continued support for the CEC and highlighted its importance as a trilateral forum. Finally, she emphasized that the most vulnerable need the most support in order to participate in climate change conversation, how the CEC’s work is important and necessary to protect our environment, and that Canada will continue to support cooperation between the three countries.

Item 7 – Youth Engagement in the CEC

CEC Executive Director Richard Morgan highlighted that in 2016 the Commission had committed to producing tangible initiatives for youth engagement in all relevant areas of the CEC’s work and underlined that a host of activities and efforts to support, engage, and work with youth have resulted in the creation of the annual Youth Innovation challenge (YIC), the EcoInnovation Network, and the first Youth Roundtable organized as part of the 2021 JPAC Public Forum and Annual Council Session. He then invited Brock Dickinson, Assistant Director, Economic Development Program at the University of Waterloo and member of the EcoInnovation Network, to introduce the winners of the CEC’s Fifth Youth Innovation Challenge.

Brock Dickinson started by thanking the Executive Director, saying that it was an honor to present the YIC winners. Pointing to how perceptions regarding youth entrepreneurship have changed and grown over time, even though barriers remain, he announced that this year, exceptionally, there were two winners from Mexico. He introduced the four winners and invited them to present their winning concepts:

United States: Xiangkun (Elvis) Cao

- C2X is an initiative to re-imagine our carbon liability as an opportunity by upscaling carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) in an integrated process.

Mexico: Claudia del Carmen Cornelio Caraveo

- The team has created a device that physically supports apiaries (without endangering them), preventing ant infestations, and providing water during periodic droughts and dry seasons, besides establishing a floristic corridor for bees—thus creating sustainable habitats for honey-producing bees.

Mexico: Gener Jesús Méndez Gutiérrez and the Rancho Alegre Collective

- Using education, tools, and experience-based learning material specializing in forestry and conservation, the project will empower communities and local leaders to protect their environments sustainably.

Canada: Gabriel Saunders

- Decomp is an organic plastic waste disposal solution that utilizes proprietary, plastic-degrading microbes to facilitate the degradation of plastics in weeks, as opposed to natural decomposition that can take several hundred years.

The winners presented their solutions, focusing on the challenges they were trying to address, a description of their solutions, along with information on their projects’ scalability, feasibility, innovation, and potential impacts. Following the winners’ presentations, Council members addressed comments to them.

Administrator Regan shared how proud he was of these winners and thanked them for taking the time to think “outside the box” and thus create outstanding ideas to address some of the world’s most pressing challenges. He invited the US winner to come visit at the EPA headquarters in Washington to provide updates on the initiative’s progress and to share his work.

Mexico's Alternate Representative, Iván Rico, also congratulated the winners for such interesting and outstanding projects, highlighting how they were able to turn problems into opportunities and create global solutions. He also shared how pleased he was with the Mexican winners' solutions that can have direct impact on ecological agricultural practices as well as social solutions. He finally invited his colleagues from the United States and Canada to support these initiatives so they can be materialized.

Canadian Alternate Representative Catherine Stewart thanked Mr. Dickinson for his introduction and enthusiasm for the YIC. She joined the United States and Mexico in thanking and congratulating the winners on their projects and for the very interesting presentations. She was impressed by the projects' caliber, expressing her confidence that they will be important tools in addressing some of the biggest environmental challenges of our time.

Justin Onwenu, the rapporteur from the Youth Roundtable, spoke of the previous day's discussions. He started by thanking the Council for their invitation to participate in the meeting and then explained the goal of the roundtable had been to discuss opportunities and challenges in ensuring youth are engaged in climate change and environmental justice discussions. He highlighted the main takeaway points from the discussions as:

- Climate issues are not only about the environment; they are also about impacts on housing, health care, education, etc., and addressing them is a necessary condition if we want to make any progress on climate issues, and youth engagement.
- Youth are looking for bold, critical, and meaningful change, and it is clear that aggressive measures are needed to reduce GHG emissions.
- Collaboration is essential to address climate change. There is a need to speak to people where they are, to leverage social media, to use terms that are accessible, and to get people excited to fight for the future. Also, the discussion needs to focus on what can be achieved together instead of individually.
- Finally, young people need to be meaningfully included in policy and program development to help make decisions on what their future will look like.

Item 8 – Dialogue with the Council on Climate Change and Environmental Justice Solutions

Executive Director Richard Morgan turned to 2021 JPAC Chair Pedro Moctezuma to moderate the panel of experts and the dialogue with the Council on Climate Change and Environmental Justice Solutions.

Mr. Moctezuma thanked Richard Morgan and Justin Onwenu and opened the dialogue period by introducing the invited expert from Canada, Tonio Sadik, who is senior director for Environment, Lands and Water at the Assembly of First Nations.

Mr. Sadik began by acknowledging that he was joining the meeting from Ottawa, on the traditional, unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation and by acknowledging his Canadian colleague, Catherine Stewart.

He explained that First Nations have been experiencing the effects of multiple crisis. In 2017, they formed a joint committee on climate action with the Canadian government and, through this table, have been able to highlight the challenges they face and the role of First Nations as active drivers and leaders of fighting climate action and instilling green economic recovery and conservation. They are ready to advance transformative climate actions based on First Nation governance, knowledge systems, and reciprocal relations with Mother Earth and that the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) had passed a resolution on climate emergency in 2019, calling for urgent and transformative actions. Such action provides opportunity to advance Indigenous leadership where Indigenous knowledge can play an equal role in the development and identification of climate solutions, shifting the conversation from the status quo to a revitalization of value systems that connects us to the land and to natural laws that govern our interaction with all Creation. He said that the AFN was finalizing a National Climate Strategy, that reconciliation was a priority in Canada, and that they must seize the opportunity to build back better.

Mr. Moctezuma thanked Mr. Sadik and introduced the next expert speaker from Mexico, Tzinnia Carranza López.

Tzinnia Carranza López expressed her pleasure to be invited to be part of this panel. She explained that social and climate justice are global challenges and that the conditions of citizens suffering from climate change impacts needed to be recognized and improved. She highlighted that the right to a safe environment is a human right and that reducing inequalities is a global responsibility. She also emphasized the need to protect human rights, women's rights, and Indigenous rights, and the need to have a strong focus on adaptation. Finally, she highlighted the importance of the Escazú Agreement and how it was an important step to increasing environmental justice in the region.

Administrator Regan introduced the next expert speaker from the United States: Gladys Limon.

Gladys Limon, Executive Director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance, thanked Administrator Regan for the opportunity to join the meeting live from the Central Coast of California and ancestral tribal land. She highlighted how marginalized communities are the first and the worst hit by climate change impacts and have less resources to adapt. She further explained how their community-led approach is the only way to ensure the necessary collective changes are made and have the transformative potential to meet the growing impacts of climate change. Ms. Limon also explained how states must act with urgency and shift their approach to protecting human health, security, and economic prosperity.

Administrator Regan thanked Ms. Limon, and Executive Director Richard Morgan invited the Canadian representative to share a few words.

Canada's Alternate Representative Catherine Stewart reiterated that Canada was currently in an election campaign; therefore, she could not participate in the dialogue, but would be in listening mode. She finished by thanking the participants for their understanding.

Executive Director Richard Morgan started the dialogue with a few initial questions to the United States and Mexican representatives:

Question #1- How do you define environmental justice and where would you see a need for it?

Administrator Regan answered that environmental justice (EJ) is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. He further explained that this goal will be achieved only when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn and work. He also shared President Biden's pledge to prioritize environmental justice, and that he had directed the EPA staff to include consideration of this topic in every aspect of their work. The EPA also supports the President's Justice 40 initiative, which aims to devote 40 percent of the benefits from federal investments to underserved communities.

Mexico's Alternate Representative Iván Rico echoed Administrator Regan's remarks and highlighted three elements that need to be included to achieve justice: equality, distribution, and participation. He said that Mexico is protecting its citizens' right to a healthy environment and that the country has a sectoral environmental program as well as legal mechanisms to promote environmental justice. However, he also shared that Mexico owes the most vulnerable and poorest communities an historical debt. To address this, the Mexican administration is focusing first on helping the poorest communities. He also shared that Mexico has started the implementation of the Escazú Agreement that will help to protect environmental activists, among others. He concluded by stating that Mexico is willing and able to address climate change and environmental justice issues.

Question #2- What challenges do you envision to achieve a transition to a low carbon circular economy?

Administrator Regan told the audience that half of the GHG emissions were coming from natural resource extraction and processing, and he highlighted the importance of reducing, reusing, and recycling materials, and of their significant economic, environmental and social benefits. He further shared that the EPA was developing a National Recycling Strategy that will help the United States increase national recycling rate from 32% to 50% by 2030. He also shared that the EPA recognizes that recycling alone will not be enough to answer current environmental challenges and that they were currently assessing potential future actions.

Mexican Alternate Representative Iván Rico started by referring to Mexico's sectoral programs for environment and natural resources that govern environmental policies in Mexico. He informed the public that Mexico was elaborating a strategy on circular economy and mentioned that important actions will include working with new, more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) (to UNFCCC under COP26) and with different sectors to raise awareness and identify challenges. Initial challenges identified included the need to implement specific activities in key sectors that will support the circular economy initiative and the need to have industrial symbiosis mechanisms, cost-benefit analysis, and financial mechanisms with preferential rates. He concluded by highlighting the importance of working together to address this issue.

JPAC Chair Pedro Moctezuma thanked both representatives and proceeded to present more questions received from the public:

Question #3 - Recent climate-related disasters informed us of the difficulties faced by marginalized communities, including that the more marginalized they are, the harder it is for them to prepare for disasters. What should governments and communities do to guarantee that vulnerable communities can seek refuge and have the same access as more privileged communities?

Administrator Regan responded that we didn't require the recent disasters to shed a light on this issue. He explained that the difference now is that governments are trying to address the underlying problems and prioritizing resources to make these communities more resilient to future disasters. He also highlighted that these are the same communities that are already burdened by pollution and that, under President Biden's leadership, the EPA is focusing on correcting these historic injustices by engaging directly with local communities and making sure that environmental justice is considered in all decisions.

Question #4 - What are some tangible ways for marginalized communities to participate in the elaboration of climate change solutions?

Tzinnia Carranza López stressed the importance of looking at climate change from a local point of view and to consider local and traditional ecological knowledge. She highlighted the role of social organizations in assisting governmental efforts and initiatives, and stressed the importance of coordinating efforts to more successfully adapt to climate change.

Iván Rico further added that there are several ways to work with local communities and that Mexico's territorial and ecological ordinances are important tools for community participation. These tools help protect communities, but also allows them to sustainably manage their resources and protect their water, land and air.

Mr. Sadik echoed the previous comments and underscored that empowering nations and communities is a key part of enabling them to find solutions for themselves. He highlighted that marginalization is a broad word that can refer to different types of marginalities. He concluded by also highlighting the importance of involving communities in discussions of the impacts of climate change and in related decision-making to ensure solutions offered are both meaningful and beneficial.

Question #5 – How does environmental equity apply today and in the future?

Gladys Limon replied that environmental equity must start with communities that have been most impacted and are the most vulnerable to the climate crisis. She highlighted that it is impossible to achieve environmental equity without racial justice and stressed the need to focus efforts on improving air quality and public health. Further, she added the need to complete the transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy to reduce GHG emissions in the most polluted communities and to ensure that vulnerable communities are also economically transitioned. She concluded by explaining that governments need to shift focus from mitigation to transformation.

Question #6 - How can the different sectors collaborate to find solutions to EJ?

Mr. Sadik reminded the audience of the joint committee of First Nations and the federal government on climate action. He explained how, with the support of the federal government, they have started to build a relationship that will support discussions on important First Nations issues.

Item 9 – Council Announcements

Administrator Regan announced the launch of a new grant program named EJ4Climate to assist underserved and vulnerable communities and Indigenous communities, in Canada, Mexico, and the United States to prepare for climate-related impacts. A call for proposals will be open from 14 September to 14 November 2021.

Mexico’s Alt Rep Iván Rico announced a new iteration of the NAPECA grants program to be launched in November 2021, with a total of C\$1,500,000 to be awarded for community projects focused on “Helping communities to recover from COVID-19 pandemic.”

Executive Director Richard Morgan announced several new initiatives, starting with one to document Indigenous approaches to freshwater management in North America. He explained how this initiative was led by the members of the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG), and that water for Indigenous communities is seen as central to the spiritual, cultural, and personal aspects of their way of life. He also took the opportunity to thank TEKEG members for their invaluable contribution to the CEC during the last year and expressed his gratitude for their time and commitment to help the CEC’s mission.

Richard Morgan also announced the new “Black Carbon mitigation and air quality improvement and environmental justice” initiative that will deploy low-cost air pollution sensors for better documenting exposure in environmental justice communities, identifying black carbon source contributions, and working with local stakeholders to formulate and assess the benefits of emission mitigation strategies.

He also presented a new, large-scale initiative to tackle ghost fishing gear. In a new cooperative effort to protect North American oceans, the CEC will be implementing an initiative focused on abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG)—also known as “ghost gear”—by providing information to decision-makers and implementing solutions across North America.

Finally, Mexico’s Iván Rico announced a new large-scale initiative of C\$1 million on environmental education that will be launched in 2022 to raise citizen awareness on the importance of the environment. He reiterated the importance of environmental education for achieving successful conservation efforts and how other initiatives, such as the new Ghost Gear initiative, will benefit from this project.

Item 10 – Closing Remarks by Canada

Canada’s Catherine Stewart expressed her pleasure in participating in the meeting and thanked Administrator Regan for having chaired the event. She further thanked Iván Rico, Richard Morgan,

Pedro Moctezuma, and the invited experts for their participation in the discussion and their important contributions to climate action. She indicated the announcements made during the meeting pointed toward the ambitious work that will take place in the coming year. She concluded by thanking all participants for their presence and insightful questions that will help shape the 2022 agenda.

Item 11 – Concluding Remarks and Passing the Baton by the United States

Administrator Regan highlighted that it has been a challenging year but one of opportunities and accomplishments. He stated he was proud of the CEC team and the exemplary results achieved for the benefit of North America's shared environment. He also thanked the GSC, the Secretariat, and JPAC and TEKEG members for their outstanding work, as well as the staff of the Secretariat and EPA for their work organizing the event. Finally, he thanked Iván Rico and Catherine Stewart for their participation.

Item 12 – Closing Remarks by Mexico

Iván Rico thanked Administrator Regan, Catherine Stewart, Minister Wilkinson and Richard Morgan, along with JPAC, the GSC, and the Secretariat staff for organizing a successful event and reiterated the positive impact the announced projects and initiatives will have on achieving CEC goals. He shared it will be an honor for Mexico to host the next Council meeting, which will take place in June 2022, hopefully in person, in Mérida, Yucatán. He concluded by thanking again the Council, the YIC winners, the panelists, and the audience for their participation.