CEC

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS FROM THE CEC'S 31ST COUNCIL SESSION AND JPAC PUBLIC FORUM, WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA:

Strengthening Environmental Justice through Community Empowerment



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Preface

The Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) operates under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), also known as CUSMA in Canada and T-MEC in Mexico, promoting mutually supportive and sustainable trade, collectively advancing environmental policies, to conserve, protect, and enhance the North American environment by addressing trilateral and regional environmental challenges and priorities, including to reduce pollution, protect biodiversity, to foster the sustainable management of natural resources and to promote healthier communities and resilient economies.

The CEC is composed of a Council, a Secretariat and a Joint Public Advisory Committee. The Council is the governing body of the Commission and is composed of cabinet-level or equivalent representatives of each country. The Secretariat provides technical, administrative, and operational support to the Council. The Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC)—composed of three citizens from each country—advises Council on any matter within the scope of the Environmental Cooperation Agreement (ECA). For more information see: www.cec.org/about

From 24 to 26 June, the CEC organized a trinational dialogue on strengthening environmental justice across North America. The three day event included a JPAC Public Forum and the 31st annual Council Session. This document is a summary of the discussions and key messages expressed by panelists and participants throughout the three days.

The event page with the agenda can be found at: www.cec.org/events/cec31.

List of Select Abbreviations and Acronyms

BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
CEC	Commission for Environmental Cooperation
CEJN	Communities for Environmental Justice Network
CELA	Canadian Environmental Law Association
CUSMA	Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement, also known as USMCA in the United States and T-MEC in Mexico
DDT	Dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane
ECA	Environmental Cooperation Agreement, North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation
ECCC	Environment and Climate Change Canada
EJ	Environmental Justice
EJ4Climate	Environmental Justice and Climate Resilience grant program
EPA	United States Environmental Protection Agency
GAC	Governmental Advisory Committee
GCC	Grupo Común de Conservación
GELP	Generation of Environmental Leaders Program Youth Teams
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Development Cooperation)
IAC	White House Environmental Justice Interagency Council
IBWC	International Boundary and Water Commission
JPAC	Joint Public Advisory Committee
LEGAIA	Legado GAIA
NAC	National Advisory Committee
NAEJAC	North American Environmental Justice Action Center
NCEJN	North Carolina Environmental Justice Network
NCFIELD	North Carolina Focused on Increasing Education, Leadership, and Dignity
NO2	Nitrogen Dioxide
ORMA	Organización para Restaurar el Medio Ambiente y la Armonía Social (Organization to Restore the Environment and Social Harmony)
PCBs	Polychlorinated biphenyls
PM2.5	Particulate matter that measures less than 2.5 micrometers
Profepa	Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Ambiente (Federal Attorney's Office for Environmental Protection)
PRTR	Pollutant Release and Transfer Register
SEM	Submission and Enforcement Matters
SO2	Sulfur dioxide
Semarnat	Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico)
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge
TEKEG	Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group
THEA	Texas Health and Environment Alliance
T-MEC	Tratado entre México, Estados Unidos y Canadá (Treaty between Mexico, the United States and Canada), also known as USMCA in the United States and CUSMA in Canada
TRI	Toxics Release Inventory
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USMCA	United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, also known as CUSMA in Canada and T-MEC in Mexico
WHEJAC	White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council
2SLGBTQIA+	Two-Spirit people, Lesbian; Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and additional identities.



Day 1
June 24, 2024

On Day 1, the JPAC Public Forum on Advancing Environmental Justice in North America kicked off the three-day event. The forum provided the public the opportunity to engage in an open dialogue. Many shared their experiences of inequitable environmental burdens and vulnerabilities that their communities face from historical and persistent pollution, extreme weather, and other environmental impacts. The CEC can help address many of these challenges by advancing environmental justice, improving health, and empowering communities, while building environmental resilience across North America.

JPAC Public Forum Welcoming Ceremony: Land Acknowledgement

Summary: The land acknowledgement was done by the CEC's Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group (TEKEG) member Amelia Reyna Monteros Guijón.

Summary of excerpts from the presentation:

The summary of excerpts from Amelia Reyna Monteros Guijón's presentation were obtained from simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English.

- First, I [Amelia] would like to thank this land that allows us to be here today, and to be part of her. I ask permission from our ancestors, from the guardians of this place, and acknowledge that these lands and the Indigenous communities are, and have been, the guardians of the traditions of Turtle Island, which we today call North America. We acknowledge their knowledge and their connection to the land as the original guardians, from time immemorial.
- Today, we would like to give thanks, and symbolically, I have brought copal (Mayan incense), which I offer as I greet the East, where knowledge, our communities, and our intelligence as human beings, are born, as the awareness that we must have for our planet.



The CEC logo welcomes participants to Wilmington, North Carolina, United States.

- I [Amelia] greet the North, where it is dark, but it is also a place to think, to turn inward, to reflect on what is right and what is wrong. It is a place that gives us clarity and direction.
- I [Amelia] greet the South, the place of vitality and life. It is where everything, even those things with a short lifespan, can be fruitful, can be good, and can allow us to find balance—a balance between light and darkness, a middle ground. It is a place where we carry the knowledge of our ancestors, who guide and remind us of who we are.
- I [Amelia] greet the West, the place of new beginnings, where sometimes we feel tired, unsure of where to go or what to do. But with the support of the other three directions, we find clarity, strength, and purpose. It is here that we are reminded to make good decisions—not just for ourselves, but for those who cannot speak, for those who must be heard.
- I [Amelia] greet the Center, the heart, the love within each of us—that internal light, that internal strength that helps us grow. It is the connection between the head and the heart that allows us to achieve better outcomes.
- I [Amelia] greet the Heavens, the sky that allows us to be here. Sometimes, when the sky is dark or when we cry too much, our tears blind us to its vastness. But we are grateful for the sky that shows us how small we are and how infinite it is.
- I [Amelia] greet the Earth, our mother, who is protective and generous. She gives us everything: food to eat, air to breathe, medicines to heal us, and wisdom to guide us. She gives us these gifts at the right time—not before, not after, but here and now.
- Symbolically, therefore, I [Amelia] burn this offering to honor the seven elements, the seven parts of each one of us. I raise this essence to the sky so that it can be purified and return to each of you in a pure way. May it connect us to the ancestors, to your roots, and may it bear good fruit for us as human beings—as diplomats, as mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends.

JPAC Public Forum Welcoming Ceremony: Welcoming Remarks from the CEC Executive Director

Summary: **Jorge Daniel Tallant, Executive Director of the CEC, delivered the following welcoming remarks about the history and current context of environmental justice.**



Jorge Daniel Taillant during his welcoming remarks.

Select excerpts from presentation:

"Environmental justice is a term that was born in the mid-20th century. A lot of people refer to environmental justice, but its true meaning is sometimes lost through widespread use. Very specific terminology and concepts define environmental justice, and much that has been written about it. Many of the contributors with us here in Wilmington at the Council Session, have contributed to our understanding of environmental justice, even coining terms such as 'environmental racism'. Its history is with us, with us today, here in this room. Because of that history, and because of our leaders, we have been forging the essence of, and it's important to remember this. Wilmington, in fact, is a cradle of the environmental justice movement. It has a long history that focuses on issues dating back to the 19th century, where civil rights leaders like Abraham Galloway—an escaped slave who traveled across North America, took up residence in Canada, in fact—fought for the rights of Black Americans. And Alexander Manley—the editor of a newspaper, the only Black newspaper in the Americas, called The Record—fought for human rights—and might have been, really, the first environmental justice activist. He fought for quality of life, health, and environmental standards as they were understood at that time. These individuals, and many others like them, many in this room today, in fact, have been fundamental to the environmental justice movement. These leaders come before us, and we must stop—and I say this especially to the young people in the room—we must stop to remember them, to understand where they came from, and what they were fighting for, and thank them for their courage and what they did in their lives. But, more importantly, you must build on their legacy; indeed, you are not starting alone. We are here today, talking about these issues because of these leaders and what they have been able to do.

Racism and discrimination come to my mind when I think about environmental justice, but you don't have to be a scholar to define what environmental justice is. Merely saying those two words together—environment and justice—already conjures up an idea of what we're talking about. Practically anyone on the planet, who has perhaps never even heard of environmental justice, just by asking them what it is, they will start to think about what environmental justice really is—and actually, it's because they can understand what it's not; that's really what this discussion is about: toxic air, extreme heat, dirty water, waste, industrial pollution, noise pollution, traffic congestion, floods, climate impacts, and the diminishing property values that result because of these—*they* are environmental justice issues, *they* are the *injustice* issues…

But EJ is much more than just identifying environmental problems. We all suffer climate change. There's no doubt about that, every one of us. But we don't all suffer it in the same way. Not all of us lose a home due to a forest fire or to a hurricane, or to flooding or rising seas. And not all of us can just pick up and move to a place that's safer, cleaner, and less climate vulnerable. We all suffer poor air quality when we go through an urban environment, or are next to a freeway, but we don't all have to have our children walk along dirty highways to go to school every day. Not all of us have respiratory illnesses because of where we live, or because a polluting industry was allowed to be built in our neighborhood. We all suffer extremely hot days, but we don't all suffer heat in the same way. Not all of us can afford

air conditioning. Not all of us live with shade trees in our neighborhood that the local government has decided to plant in our neighborhoods…*or not to plant* in our neighborhoods.

Environmental justice is about the equity or the *inequity* of benefiting from environmental resources, as much as it is about the equity and *inequity* of who suffers the impacts of environmental pollution. Whether it's because of our gender, our religion, or where we came from, or what we look like, the color of our skin… these issues determine who suffers and who benefits from environmental resources and burdens.

Environmental justice is about fairness. It's about fairness of benefits…and it's about the *unfairness* of burdens. But it is about even more than that. Environmental justice is about the intentionality… think about that word…the 'intentionality' or the dangerous oversights, that people make consciously, or sometimes unconsciously. It's about how society has made those conscious choices about who will benefit and who will suffer from environmental resources or from pollution.

Environmental justice is about public policies that have intentionally decided to send pollution to certain sectors or has looked the other way when making those decisions. It's also about those unconscious choices, however unintentional, to send harm in inequitable directions.

Environmental justice is about the four Ps as I call them. Pollution, People, Place and Policy, and how those interrelate. When you're looking for a place to start a home, or to enjoy the weekend or take a vacation, you don't look for a place with bad air. You don't look for a place with extreme heat, or that is next to some noisy freeway or some polluting industry. That's not where you go to have a nice, safe and quiet time. You look for something green and clean, and inviting; a place that's quiet, tranquil and inspiring. You look for a place that will help you thrive, where you will enjoy your environment and enjoy life, where you can live in good health, and where you will be happy with your family, on whatever it is that you're doing. You look for a place where, after a long day's work, you will actually want to go home, where you will enjoy being there. You look for a place where you will feel safe.

But the reality is that not everyone has such a place in their lives. That is what environmental justice is about. It's about ensuring that we're all able to exercise the right to a healthy environment, for ourselves, for our children, for our grandchildren, and for generations to come. And even more, so that no matter our race or gender, our age, our sexual orientation, or our disability, or our migratory status, or any other defining characteristic about us, it's about making sure that no one has the right to hold those rights away from us or not allow us to live in a healthy place.

Environmental justice has become the goal of many advocates for sustainability, of many communities seeking to improve their lives, to rid themselves of pollution, and to prosper in a healthy environment. But not all communities can do that. And environmental justice has also become the goal of a lot of public policy. But efforts to promote it don't always carry the environmental justice label. They are not always called by that name. And this is something we're learning about at the CEC as we dive deeper into environmental justice.

Sometimes it comes disguised as the need for more information about decisions that affect our lives. Or that we have access to pollution data and know where that contamination is. Or that we are able to participate in processes and in decision-making that will determine the industries that go in our neighborhoods, or where those freeways go through our cities.

Sometimes EJ comes as maps that show us where the pollution is, and where people live. And when you start looking at those maps, putting together where that pollution is, and where those trees are, and where people are living, and where people are *not* living, EJ starts to become very clear. It may show up in policies and projects, such as urban forests and gardens. It may show up as cooling stations for hot days. It may show up as just better, cheaper, or more thermal building material to keep us warm in winter and cool in summer, or projects to capture water. Or maybe it's a project about daylighting a stream that has been covered by cement, a stream that used to be the life of our neighborhood's ecosystem, but then was no longer to be seen.

And so whether environmental justice (EJ) appears as an attempt to tackle historical, persistent or systematic

problems, about people, place and pollution, or whether EJ is about nature, and nature-based solutions to improve environmental quality, EJ is about creating a better environment for those who need it most, and for those who have done the least to cause environmental problems, and for those who have the least resources necessary to live better, healthier lives.

I don't need to tell this crowd that we have a climate emergency. You all know that. We all feel that this climate emergency is escalating quickly and unfolding all around us. The latest news is not very good. The year 2023, just like 2022, becomes our hottest year on record and the temperatures are still rising. We all talk about the Paris accords and 1.5°C; well, we're breaching 1.5°—we're already there—and so we're not meeting the mark, and this is triggering irreversible tipping points. And we're not slowing the trend, unfortunately, we're headed to 2.8°C by the end of the century, or even higher. And at this point, there is no time to waste. We have to choose very quickly and very wisely what to do about this emergency, and bad choices should not be on the table. We don't have the luxury of taking bad choices and then correcting our path.

Each tenth of a degree matters. It means a tenth of a degree of more suffering, pain and irreversible ecological collapse. And here's something I was chatting about with our youth in the room this morning. Decarbonization is not enough. It doesn't fix the problem quick enough. We need other solutions. We need to not only decarbonize, but we need to remove other very powerful pollutants, like methane, 86 times worse than CO_2, and black carbon, which is melting our glaciers and is also terrible for human health. We need avoided warming strategies. We need to cool without *having* to cool. So, if you're spending all of your energy on cooling your environments, this is not the way to go. We need to bring in nature to help us cool the environment. Whether that's through reflective roofs, or by placing gardens on rooftops, or other shading or more thermal materials, this is what we need to be thinking about, and we need to be—very quickly—thinking about it.

EJ is about a balanced approach to mitigation and adaptation. We need an environmental justice approach to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss.

I want now to shift quickly to the CEC, to JPAC, and to this Council session, and to talk about why we're here today, and what we hope to achieve. The CEC was created 30 years ago. It was integral to the NAFTA agreement, now called the USMCA/CUSMA or T-MEC in Spanish. The three countries got together to work on environment and to forge a North American identity. NAFTA was the first trade agreement to incorporate an environmental chapter. There are three main bodies, the Council, which is the governing board, made up of the heads of each country's environmental agencies, the US EPA, Environment and Climate Change Canada, and Semarnat of Mexico; the Secretariat, which has helped organize this event, and which is our team that sits in Montreal, and JPAC, the advisory body that serves as a channel for public input and advises the Council, and then there's you. You are an integral part of the CEC and it's important to remember that. And I also want to recognize the TEKEG, the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Expert Group, because the TEKEG is a growing body within the CEC, an advisory group that we love to work with that is really helping us.

The Council Session is the moment when we come together each year, to talk shop, to talk about where we've been, where we're at, and where we want to go. And this forum, especially for JPAC and this meeting today, coming right before the beginning of the governing Council meeting, is where you prepare your Advice to Council. It's where you talk about what should be the priority. And, as in any democracy, it's the people who tell the government what needs to be done. The exchanges that will take place here today, will be recorded and gathered. We're talking about different issues and about setting the agenda. This is the moment where you come together as one of our constituent bodies and get to speak to the Council, to tell them where *you* think they should be thinking about heading. Your opinion really does matter. The CEC gets its orientation and direction from your input.

I challenge you to think about your work and how it contributes to environmental justice and the theme of this meeting. Try to think about equity, think about how to reverse those patterns of discrimination, and then think hard about what you want to say to the Council, because it is important. How we say things, and what we say, does matter.

Not all environmental work is about addressing inequity, and I want to stress that because sometimes we want to think that everything is environmental justice, and it's not. Environmental justice does have some very specific pillars and elements to it. It really is about equity; it is about fairness. It is about discrimination. So, as you think about that message, think about how we need to move forward on environmental justice. Our three countries have committed significant resources to this environmental justice pathway. This US administration has done probably more than any other, maybe even combined to put resources into environmental justice. So, thank you to the United States! Mexico has firmly embraced the pillars of environmental justice, procedural pillars and, through agreements like the Escazú Agreement, in contributing substantively to discussions regionally and even globally, to environmental justice. And Canada has just adopted its first environmental justice law, which is fantastic, and that's going to lead to much discussion, to engagement, to strategies and policies and programs about environmental justice. So, our three countries are together on this issue at this moment, very aligned on environmental justice policy, and it would be great if we can take this opportunity to steer our trilateral platform in a constructive direction.

A few of the things that we've been doing at the CEC over the course of the last few years: we're in the next cycle of our Environmental Justice for Climate grants, an important part of our work, working with communities. We've just launched a Communities for Environmental Justice Network and some of you are a part of that, and we hope to see more of you engaged. We have also launched a new project on air quality for environmental justice. And we're making environmental justice a cross-cutting element in all of our work. But we can do a lot more. And we will. We understand that environmental justice means very different things to different communities and to each of our countries, so we've launched a deep dive, looking into environmental justice, trying to understand it better. We're learning and asking questions and trying to break the status quo and thinking about what environmental justice really means in each of our countries.

I draw your attention to a few resources that are already available. A discussion paper, a product of over a year of research by interns, by our new environmental justice fellows who are here with us at this conference. This discussion paper is a deep dive into the history of environmental justice. We also just published a paper on it and on 2 spirit LGBTQIA+ issues, following the fantastic discussions we had last year at a roundtable on this issue, doing a deeper dive on the intersectionality of environmental justice. We've just launched a new environmental justice website. I guarantee you, you'll be hearing a lot more about the CEC and environmental justice in the coming months and years.

We're very interested in what is emerging on environmental justice, on the intersectionality and multi-disciplinary dimensions of it, including Indigenous questions about environmental justice that are somewhat different than the more traditional discussion around it. This Council session is all about environmental justice. …

Institutions, government agencies, the CEC, NGOs, academic institutions, are all important to this fight, but more important than the institutions are the collective people who lead them: the leaders, the people who make up the institutions, the staff, the program people—these are the people who are actually working on these issues, and the individuals matter more than the institutions. We have a choice: we can be complacent about how things are always done—so that when you think about those historical and systemic problems of discrimination, "well, that is the history, that is how things have been done"—or we can choose to change, which is really our opportunity. Change to make things better, to correct the systems, and to correct those historic wrongs that have taken place on the few and the disadvantaged.

I invite all of us to choose that change, and I invite you all to help lead the way. The time is now, we're out of time, so please take action, move forward, do your thing, and thank you very much for coming to our Council Session."



Key policies, reports, and/or tools referenced:

CEC EJ Discussion Paper (link)
CEC 2SLGBTQIA+ Discussion Paper (link)
CEC EJ website (link)

JPAC Public Forum Welcoming Ceremony: Opening Remarks by the 2024 JPAC Chair

Summary: **Esteban Escamilla, CEC 2024 JPAC Chair, gave an overview of the JPAC Public Forum agenda and contextualized the role and mandate of JPAC.**

Key highlights & takeaways:

- JPAC is composed of nine volunteers, with each country in North America appointing three. JPAC advises Council of the three North American Environmental Ministers on any matter within the scope of the Agreement on Environmental Cooperation
- JPAC works to protect ecosystems and promote economic development in a sustainable manner, while also ensuring public engagement and CEC transparency via meetings with the public.
- Esteban Escamilla's introduction also highlighted this year's focus on strengthening collaboration and efforts to incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Indigenous perspectives, as well as diversity and inclusion and gender equity as cross cutting themes.



Esteban Escamilla Prado during his remarks.

Keynote Presentation by Diandra Marizet Esparza



Diandra Marizet Esparza during her keynote presentation.

Summary: Diandra Marizet Esparza, Executive Director of Intersectional Environmentalist, delivered a keynote presentation on the need to radically imagine a new future and change systemic drivers of environmental injustice.

Select excerpts from presentation:

Quotes by Diandra Marizet Esparza:

"…for those of you who haven't heard the term yet, intersectional environmentalism…is an inclusive version of environmentalism that advocates for both the protection of people and the planet. It's a lens that identifies the ways in which injustices happening to marginalized communities and the Earth are interconnected, and it brings those injustices done to the most vulnerable communities and to the Earth to the forefront of our conversations. And as we gain deeper understandings of what environmental injustice looks like, and all the ways we can apply an intersectional lens to identify those most vulnerable, we also need tools to imagine the justice part—what does a just future look like? And who gets to participate in imagining what it looks like? We need to radically improve our ability to imagine a future where we thrive with enough clarity and detail that it can be translated into policy, wealth redistribution, emergency response, and climate resilience…I've learned most environmentalists can imagine the end of humanity with more detail and clarity then they can imagine a future beyond the most exploitative, unsustainable, and life-threatening industries we have foolishly built economic reliance on…

So, what's missing? My team has completed research and consulting projects for some of our country's largest academic institutions, Fortune 500 companies, and we've led community engagement initiatives for the White House, and I repeatedly found the same thing: the solutions to the climate crisis already exist and they exist at local, organized levels. We just have to be humble enough as people sitting in rooms like this to admit that our current systems don't work. We can shape the future beyond corporate exploitation and environmental injustice. We can heal our planet, but we must bring diverse voices and community-led solutions to the table, we must provide them with resources and aid. And most importantly, we must prevent corporations from engaging in predatory behaviors…

So, here's why, of all the organizational mission statements I've supported, I can loosely summarize all of them into one statement: climate change has unfolded rapidly before us because our elders have had their relationship to land disrupted or destroyed to support corporate interests. The EPA's [US Environmental Protection Agency] role is to protect public health in the environment, but the scope and power of the EPA doesn't include enough clarity around protecting people's relationship and connection to land from corporate interests.

We need new guidelines that consider the cultural, spiritual and the historical significance of land to communities who have been stewarding them for generations. Indigenous and diverse cultural relationships to land have been developed over thousands of years, and these are relationships that once wove sustainability into the fabric of society. We are losing that.

Indigenous communities, for example, currently protect 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity, despite making up less

than 5% of the global population. Meanwhile, Indigenous communities report being deprioritized in data collection, often as a result of how small their population size is. Maybe we should ask ourselves, '*Why is the population size so small?*'

We need intersectional approaches to research and data collection that tell us not only if restoration and conservation projects are working, but if we're successfully providing the tools to help people reignite their traditional ecological practices or establish new practices that are culturally relevant to their communities. We need less solutions that look like academic papers and we need more solutions that look and feel like home…

Because policy cannot produce sustainable futures. Only communities with connections to land can do that. What policy can do is protect our ability to reclaim that relationship from predatory behaviors of corporations. And we are prepared to do so in economically viable ways…

We have to see just how uniquely people experience environmental issues so that we learn there are no one-size fits all solutions. People with intersecting identities uniquely experience climate change and environmental exploitation, and much of our understanding of this in the United States was born out of the intersection of race and income level. Just five years ago it was hard to talk to people about the intersection of environmentalism and social justice.…

In 1987 the United Church of Christ published a report called Toxic Waste and Race. This report concluded and made irrefutable, that race was the number one indicator of proximity to toxic waste sites in the United States. This is still true today, and I am certain it applies similarly to Mexico and Canada as well. Reports like this have led to deeper learning. Like Latin and Latina communities experiencing approximately 56 and 63% more air pollution than they cause, while white Americans experience 17% less air pollution than they cause. This report was such a significant milestone, that not only did it start movements around environmental racism but also opened up other conversations about additional identities that face disproportionate environmental burdens that were later emboldened by the coining of terms like '*intersectionality*' by Kimberley Krenshaw.

For example, due to discrimination that trans, queer and 2 spirit communities encounter in health care spaces, their ability to receive adequate treatment for pollution-related and other health issues related to environmental concerns, can not only be psychologically risky as a result of that discrimination but it can also be physically dangerous. … The EPA must step in because the protection of human health is at risk. … Similarly, disabled communities with respiratory and cardiovascular issues may become more vulnerable to things like air pollution, and they may live in higher risk areas due to higher low-income rates, and therefore thwart access to health care systems. … This clearly shows us that queer rights is an environmental justice issue, that disability rights is an environmental justice issue and food access is an environmental justice issue. And we experience these issues at varying degrees of advantage and disadvantage based on social and systemic conditions that we've all connected to our identities.

Thankfully, grassroots organizations and efforts all around the country and the world are already building solutions that take their communities' unique needs into account. But we have to ensure that they have the resources to research their solutions, train and educate their communities in culturally relevant ways. And provide human services that keep their communities healthy, safe and engaged.…

Looking at critical issues that are so deeply connected like environmental racism, the rising health crisis, joblessness, poverty, the housing crisis, we need to adopt language that eliminates loopholes for exploitative corporations from industries like fossil fuels, agriculture, fashion, transportation and development. We must disincentivize them from targeting, perpetuating and creating more vulnerable communities for short-term economic gain, which has never been successful in creating a '*trickle-down*' effect that stabilizes our economies.

In the face of such flagrant inequities, the penalties are not high enough. The loopholes are too big for wealthy corporations who just build penalty fees into their operations.… Smaller businesses should not bear disproportionate burdens of environmental progress. Because this leads to fewer community owned shops and services.…We need to protect small community businesses, while holding large corporations who cause harm, accountable.…

In 2023 Texas produced more oil than every country in the world besides Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Texas' fossil fuel activity is expected to make cancer diagnoses hit record highs in 2024. However, Texas is also the number one state in producing renewable energy.... Texas has the means to drive a clean and just transition, and in the meantime, can connect the electrical grids so that all Americans have access to reliable energy sources. But we do need a transition that is just....

Underpaid and unpaid labor is an environmental justice issue, which also connects to how immigration is an environmental justice issue. Informal economy workers in the US usually Mexican migrants, not only drive our agricultural work forces under grueling conditions like our record high temperatures that are currently killing people all over the country, but they're also hired by big disaster recovery firms in the US only to face exploitation and risk injury or death. ...We disincentivize investments in resilient solutions that protect communities from disaster to begin with.

Climate migration globally is also rising as we continue to allow people's relationship to land to be disrupted or destroyed. I was recently in Puerto Rico, where I heard from organizers who are campaigning with the slogan, 'no more people without homes and no more homes without people'. Developers are flocking to Puerto Rico, but something's off—developers are getting away with coming in and building luxury buildings on the beach, for largely white, wealthy tourists—while community restoration plans that have proven to be more resilient to storms remain without investment. The funding being funneled into recovering coastal areas isn't reaching those most impacted. It isn't protecting people's relationship to land....

Which brings me to the climate migrant story, one that is connected to our global human rights failures. Currently people in our countries are watching millions of people being displaced, starved, bombed, and then erased from history in Palestine, Sudan, Congo, and more. These deeply interconnected issues always come back to relationships to land that are going unprotected. Indigenous Palestinians, for example, who are currently being forcibly displaced from their homelands, as they have been for over 70 years now, are being replaced by non-native trees that harm the environment, and new Israeli neighborhoods that hide evidence of Palestinian existence. In fact, freshly bombed Palestinian land is already being put on the market for Israelis to purchase right now, as you and I sit here... Land is being poisoned so that it's no longer livable, and safe routes are being bombed so movement feels impossible—this is an environmental justice disaster that needs urgent accountability and action...

Our ancestors and our elders have overcome the unimaginable, and this has taught me that joy is not a gift, it is a discipline — a practice of showing up and imagining creative new ways to protect people and this planet with the skills and the resources that we have, because that's all that we've ever done. So, I am asking you today to meet the unimaginable, with a radical imagination. We have so much opportunity, and it starts with ensuring that people can reclaim environmentally connected cultures, and relationships to land. Our processes must include community-based participatory research so that our critical voices, stories and knowledge from those most vulnerable can help shape more protective policies. We need more collaborative governance that includes Land Back initiatives and sovereignty for Indigenous communities that can recognize ecologies we share...

We must support grassroots organizers in accessing funding more easily to invest in their community efforts and public programs and education campaigns. We need more cultural organizers facilitating programs designed to engage their own communities instead of bringing people who aren't from our neighborhoods, tasking us with the burden of educating them for years before they can really make meaningful change in our lives.

We need to enforce stronger corporate accountability. We need systems that acknowledge the economic contributions of informal economy workers. We need to demand urgent phasing out of fossil fuels and a just transition. We need to protect Indigenous rights, and we must recognize genocide as the human rights issue that it is.

Your task now, this week, as you navigate connecting with one another and as you continue listening to all the panels and discussions, is to recognize intersectional environmentalism everywhere you go, to see the interconnected nature of all these issues across our countries, to focus on removing barriers that prevent communities from accessing resources they need and building stronger systems of accountability for corporations who



Georgina O'Farrill, CEC Head of Unit, Communications, Outreach and Engagement, listens to the keynote address by Diandra Marizet Esparza.

have caused the climate crisis and made the CEC so imperative to begin with. And it starts with a willingness to radically imagine the future where we get to thrive on this planet, not on Mars."
— Diandra Marizet Esparza

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Climate change has severed ancestral ties to land, and environmental policies must explicitly protect these cultural and spiritual connections from corporate interests.
- Conservation and research efforts should empower communities to reclaim traditional ecological practices.
- People experience environmental injustice at varying degrees of advantage and disadvantage based on social and systemic conditions connected to their intersectional identity.
- LGBTQ2S+ and disability rights are environmental justice issues.
- Wealth inequality worsens climate vulnerability, enabling industries to prioritize profit over people and the planet.
- Indigenous sovereignty, Land Back, accessible funding for grassroots organizers, and governance that centers impacted communities, are imperative for environmental justice.
- Stronger corporate accountability, recognition of informal workers, and a rapid fossil fuel phaseout are necessary to dismantle systemic environmental injustices.
- There are disparities in funding environmental justice organizations, compared to other environmental organizations.

Examples given:

- Warren County, NC (1982): Birthplace of the environmental justice movement, where community members protested against toxic waste dumping.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (1976): Intended to safeguard communities from hazardous waste but failed to protect Warren County, NC, from toxic dumping.
- Toxic Waste and Race Report (1987): Published by the United Church of Christ, this report confirmed race as the strongest predictor of proximity to toxic waste sites in the United States.
- Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Sustainability Initiative (2023): Yale study, analyzing $5 billion in grants awarded by 220 foundations over 35 states, found that major environmental organizations receive more funding than all environmental justice groups combined.
- Building Equity and Alignment Initiative (2020): Report revealed that only 1% of environmental grant-making from major funders supports environmental justice groups, with even less going to organizations led by women of color.
- Solutions Project Research: Found that half of all philanthropic climate funding goes to just 20 national organizations, 90% led by white people, 80% by men.

Panel 1 Legal and Policy Instruments to Access and Implement Environmental Justice in North America

Summary: Historically, the environmental burdens resulting from the use and misuse of land and its resources have been distributed unequally, with poor, marginalized, and minority communities bearing a disproportionate part of the burden. This panel session, with four panelists, presented various examples from Canada, Mexico and the United States of legal and policy mechanisms, and instruments, used to access and implement environmental justice. The moderator was JPAC member Robert Varney.



Robert W. Varney, JPAC member and moderator, during the panel session: Legal and Policy Instruments to Access and Implement Environmental Justice in North America.



Paolo Solano, CEC Director, Legal Affairs and SEM Unit along with Caitlin McCoy, CEC Legal Officer, Legal Affairs and SEM Unit.

Panel 1 Presentation by Paolo Solano

Summary: Paolo Solano, Director of Legal Affairs and Submissions on Enforcement Matters (SEM) Unit at the CEC, presented on the CEC's Submission on Enforcement Matters (SEM) process, including its history, submission procedures, and notable case studies.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Environmental information is key to environmental justice.
- The SEM process allows individuals, residents, or organizations in North America to submit information alleging that a country is failing to enforce its environmental laws, triggering a due diligence response from the Parties.
- The SEM process begins with a submission, followed by a review and determination of admissibility, and where appropriate, a response from the Party for which the allegation was made. Parties typically have 60 days to respond, providing information about enforcement actions and/or pending proceedings related to the submission. Based on a review of the submission and Party response, the CEC Secretariat may recommend preparing a factual record. A factual record is a fact-finding exercise that compiles information and highlights enforcement gaps that may exist.
- At the time of the Council session, the SEM process had received 114 submissions and published 27 factual records.

Examples given:

- A few notable submissions were mentioned, including submissions on the Loggerhead Turtle in Mexico, the North Atlantic Right Whale, the Vaquita Porpoise, and deforestation linked to avocado production in Michoacán, Mexico. These can be found in the registry of submissions (link).

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

SEM process and published factual records. The SEM Compliance Tracker provides the public with a resource to learn about past and active SEM submissions, and to track compliance with the SEM process deadlines established under the North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation, the Guidelines for Submissions on Enforcement Matters and Articles 24.27 and 24.28 of the Environment Chapter of the free trade agreement between Canada, Mexico and the United States (CUSMA, T-MEC, USMCA). The SEM Compliance Tracker may be found here: (link).

Panel 1 Presentation by Aliénor Rougeot

Summary: Aliénor Rougeot, Program Manager of Climate and Energy at Environmental Defence Canada, shared information about a past SEM submission regarding the Alberta Tar Sands in Northern Canada that led to a factual record.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Tar sands are a fossil fuel energy source which require energy and carbon-intensive processes. Their exploitation has been systematically criticized for its significant pollution to the local environment and due to their contribution to GHG emissions.
- In the Canadian tar sands, where production has ramped up, tar sand production is located on Treaty 8 territory, which is the traditional territory of Cree and Métis Indigenous Nations. The production process is highly destructive to these communities, requiring both significant deforestation and resulting in trillions of liters of toxic wastewater that is put into tailings ponds, unlined holes in the ground, which leak into the environment and cause significant health consequences for downstream Indigenous communities.
- In 2017, Environmental Defence Canada, Natural Resources Defense Council and Daniel T'seleie, a Dene activist from Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories, filed a SEM submission. Though the record couldn't assess whether Canada's enforcement of the Fisheries Act was sufficient, the submitters received confirmation that the tailings ponds are leaking, significantly surpassing allowed industry boundaries.
- Though the production of tar sand oil happens in Canada, Aliénor Rougeot explained that most Canadian oil is sold to the USA, cementing the importance of cross-border solidarity and the trilateral relationship between the three North American countries.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- Canada Fisheries Act R.S.C., 1985, c. F-14



Aliénor Rougeot during the panel discussion.

Panel 1 Presentation by Amanda Hauff

Summary: **Amanda M. Hauff, Senior Advisor on Environmental Justice at the Office of International and Tribal Affairs of the USA EPA, presented on the USA EPA's environmental justice policies and tools, including the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council (WHEJAC) and White House Environmental Justice Interagency Council (IAC).**



Amanda M. Hauff during her presentation.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- USA Executive Order 14008, signed by USA President Joe Biden in 2021, "launched an ambitious environmental agenda for the entire federal government. The executive order recognizes that all Americans deserve to live in healthy, safe places and have access to safe communities, playgrounds, and a variety of other essential resources."
- WHEJAC is an advisory council which allows overburdened communities to participate and be heard in federal policies and activities. WHEJAC's working groups have worked on climate planning, preparedness and response, recovery, and Indigenous peoples and tribal affairs, to better inform US decision-making.
- The IAC is an internal government body made up of key federal agencies, that seeks to advance environmental justice and develop strategies to address both current and historical environmental injustices.
- Justice40 is an initiative aiming to direct 40% of the overall benefits of specific federal programs—such as those related to climate, energy, and affordable and sustainable housing—to underserved communities. Justice40 seeks to prioritize community needs and is supported by significant funding under the Inflation Reduction Act, the American Rescue Plan, and other investments.
- An Environmental Justice Scorecard evaluates what programs are being executed, the environmental burdens communities are facing, and how clean energy is being delivered, while also ensuring that community input is integrated into everything the US EPA does.
- Amanda Hauff highlighted that federal agencies are also building Environmental Justice Strategic Plans, as well as launching Environmental Justice and Equity Offices, specifically highlighting the US Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s recent establishment of a Commission on Equity.
- EPA's Legal Tools to Advance Environmental Justice, published in May 2022, is a document which highlights the environmental and civil rights statutes that EPA implements, focusing on how they support human health and environmental protection for overburdened communities.
- The Technical Guidance for Assessing Environmental Justice in Regulatory Analysis is a guide which helps EPA analysts evaluate potential environmental justice concerns linked to regulatory decisions.
- Amanda Hauff also mentioned EJ screening and mapping tools, including the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, as well as EJScreen, which includes indices comparing demographic and social factors like housing, lead-based paint exposure, and more.

Panel 1 Presentation by Erika Hernández Mariaca

Summary: **Erika Hernández Mariaca, Co-Founder of Collective Cuentepec Tosepan, presented on Indigenous concepts of environmental justice generally as well as how her community, the Nahua Indigenous people of Cuentepec, organized against the impacts caused by foreign mining corporations.**



Erika Hernández Mariaca during her presentation.

Select excerpt from presentation:

The quote from Érika Hernández Mariaca was revised by the panelist after the event and was obtained from the original in Spanish.

"We Indigenous peoples are guardians who sustain life in the world. We manage our lands autonomously, exercise free self-determination, and safeguard our cultures. We demand that our rules and regulations be recognized, respected, and implemented in practice."
— Erika Hernández Mariaca

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Erika Hernández Mariaca highlighted what environmental justice is for Indigenous peoples, specifically bringing attention to Indigenous self-determination over the territories they steward.
- She also mentioned that, despite preserving the majority of the world's biodiversity, Indigenous Peoples are vulnerable to environmentally destructive, extractive, mega-projects that threaten territories and displace peoples. She referenced stories of resistance and emphasized the need for governments, corporations, and other stakeholders to respect Indigenous laws and rights.

Examples given:

- Erika Hernández Mariaca spoke of her own community, the Nahua Indigenous people of Cuentepec in Mexico, which is under threat by the mining industry and foreign companies. "In 2003, foreign mining companies like Esperanza Silver, Alamos Gold, and Zacatecas Silver were granted a concession…for an open-pit mining project. As a community, we cannot accept such a project because this open-pit practice would result in the removal of vast amounts of Earth—one ton of Earth for just half a gram of silver or gold." As a result, the Nahua Indigenous people of Cuentepec convened a gathering to draft a decree on April 24, 2022, that banned mining activity from the territory, in accordance with the Mexican Constitution, Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- April 24, 2022, decree by the Nahua Indigenous people of Cuentepec banning mining activity (link). This decree is grounded in the Mexican Constitution, Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, UNDRIP, and the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Report From the US National and Governmental Advisory Committee Representatives

Summary: **Vincent Nathan, Chair of National Advisory Committee (NAC), and Austin Nunez, Chair of Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC), presented on the role of the NAC and the GAC within the US Federal Government.**

Key highlights & takeaways:

- The two committees, created by the 1994 Presidential Executive Order #12915, the federal implementation of the North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation, advise the US government, represented by the EPA Administrator and EPA Alternative Representative (Alt. Rep.) for the EPA Administrator, on trade and environmental issues related to the CEC. They meet twice a year to review the CEC's operational plan, budget, and draft strategic plan, and provide recommendations in the form of advice letters.
- The NAC is composed of 15 members from state, local, and tribal governments. The GAC is composed of 15 members from academia, industry, and non-profit organizations.

Examples given:

- Champion Cities Initiative announced during 2023 Council Session in Canada

Panel 2 Community Mobilization and Environmental Justice Challenges

Summary: **Environmental justice acknowledges the overlapping nature of injustices affecting marginalized communities and the Earth and identifies how they are interconnected. This panel session presented the various principles of environmental justice and showcased community examples reflecting EJ issues. Additionally, it provided a platform to discuss current EJ challenges in Canada, Mexico, and the United States and to share reflections on the future trajectory of EJ in North America. The panel consisted of five presenters and was moderated by CEC JPAC member Cessia Esther Chuc Uc.**



Discussions during Panel 2: Community Mobilization and Environmental Justice Challenges.



Naolo Charles during his presentation.

Panel 2 Presentation by Naolo Charles

Summary: Naolo Charles, Founder of Black Environmental Initiative, and Co-Founder of Canadian Coalition for Environmental and Climate Justice; presented on the history of humans and their interactions with the natural environment, particularly focusing on the way racialized communities have been disproportionately harmed by environmental toxins and wastes.

Select excerpts from presentation:

"True power to change these situations is in the communities. It's not in the powerful structures that we have, it's not in government—it's in the communities themselves. Our jobs as environmental justice advocates are to find a way to give resources to communities so that they can find the solutions to their own problems…History really matters a lot in terms of environmental justice. If we don't tell that history, it makes it easy for the racialist to tell people that when we do environmental justice work, it's about creating 'special treatment' for people, or it's about 'playing the victim card'….One of the biggest obstacles to fighting and winning the fight against climate change and capitalism is racism, because racism is the reason why we can't see humanity in all of us…One of the most dangerous things that capitalism did was destroying the land, [and cause] the land pollution—but capitalism also created mental pollution. I think we need to clean our mental before we can actually really clean the communities."
— Naolo Charles

Key highlights & takeaways:

- CO_2 is not the only relevant pollutant; racialized communities in Canada are greatly impacted by many other pollutants, including particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$), nitrogen dioxide (NO_2), and sulfur dioxide (SO_2), which all lead to disease and even death in communities that often live near highways and industrial areas; lead and mercury in the water of communities surrounded by petrochemical industry; VOCs, pesticides, and toxins that affect farm workers, rural communities, and the public's food supply; radon, the decay byproduct of uranium, and second leading cause of lung cancer that Canadian communities will occur increasingly with investments in nuclear energy; and many dangerous chemicals in personal care and beauty products.
- Across the world and throughout time, "racialists and capitalists, who, powered by greed," have dispossessed peoples of their native land, repressed resistance, and polluted communities.
- We must accurately convey history in order to help illuminate why environmental justice is so important and combat the assumption that it is "special treatment" of any sort. This includes how the original inhabitants of many places, whether Indigenous people across North America, or African tribes (pre-European arrival), face the same challenges of displacement and colonization that harms both the environment and the people living on it.

Examples given:

- Chemical Valley near Sarnia in Ontario was referred to as having contaminated water.
- Naolo Charles highlighted the work of Dr. Ingrid Waldron, who, with her book titled "There's Something in the Water" and a documentary of the same name, brought awareness to communities of Shelburne, Nova Scotia, Canada. These communities faced the impacts of a toxic dump. In addition, Dr. Ingrid Waldron helped push for the first environmental racism bill to be passed in Canada.
- There are at least ten to twelve historical Black communities across Canada that have been eradicated by processes of displacement and devaluation, including Africville and Birchtown in Nova Scotia; Hogan's Alley in British Columbia; Little Burgundy in Quebec; and Oro, Wilberforce, North Buxton in Ontario.

Panel 2 Presentation by Josefa Sánchez Contreras

Summary: Presentation by Josefa Sánchez Contreras, from the Zoque Indigenous community of Chimalapa, Oaxaca, and researcher at University of Granada. She spoke about environmental justice challenges with regards to Indigenous Peoples and a just transition.

Key Highlights & takeaways:

- There are three major challenges related to environmental justice, particularly in Indigenous territories, and how they intersect with community mobilization.
- The first challenge is the demand for minerals in response to the climate crisis. As we know, the world has exceeded the geophysical limits of the planet, and we are facing a profound climate crisis that threatens the possibility of life on Earth. The demand for minerals has skyrocketed as part of the global energy transition.
- Josefa Sánchez Contreras shared that the World Bank has projected that the extraction of approximately three billion tons of minerals will be needed to support decarbonization and electrification. This transition, while essential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, has profound impacts on communities, especially in countries like Mexico.
- A major question is: How can we exercise environmental justice in the face of increasing mineral extraction driven by global demand for energy transition, when it comes at the expense of Indigenous territories and local communities?
- The second challenge related to energy transition involves the large land areas needed for renewable energy infrastructure, such as wind farms. In Mexico, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region has become a site for massive wind farms that are causing significant ecological damage, including water table depletion and disruption of migratory bird routes. Environmental impact assessments are often incomplete or limited to small-scale areas, without considering the regional or broader ecological effects. This highlights the need for greater transparency and regional perspectives in environmental governance, especially regarding renewable energy projects.
- Lastly, the third challenge is the ongoing conflicts over sacred territories and the growing violence against environmental defenders. In Mexico, many Indigenous communities face direct threats to their lands from mining and energy companies. These territories are not just economic assets but are culturally and spiritually significant to Indigenous Peoples. The violence that accompanies these conflicts places environmental defenders at great risk, and Mexico has become one of the most dangerous countries for environmental activists. This reflects the deep historical legacies of colonialism, which continue to fuel inequalities and environmental degradation.
- The environmental justice movement must take into account the aforementioned complexities. Solutions must be rooted in local community statutes, recognizing the right to self-determination, autonomy, and the sacredness of the land. We cannot continue to create top-down policies without acknowledging the lived experiences of the people who depend on and protect these lands.
- Environmental justice is not simply about mitigating environmental damage but also about addressing the systemic inequities that have been perpetuated by colonialism.
- As the climate crisis intensifies, we cannot afford to repeat the same colonial dynamics under the guise of green transitions. Legal mechanisms must be put in place to address agricultural conflicts, protect Indigenous rights to territory, and ensure the rights of nature.

Examples given:

- In the Chimalapas region in Mexico, a biodiverse and sacred area, mining concessions granted to Canadian companies are threatening water sources and sacred land. Despite the communities' protests, the extraction continues, highlighting the tension between energy transition goals and the protection of land and people.

Panel 2 Presentation by Dr. Chris Lamont Brown

Summary: **Presentation by Dr. Chris Lamont Brown[1], Co-Director of Research and Education, North Carolina Environmental Justice Network.**



Chris Lamont Brown during their presentation.

Select excerpts from presentation:

Quote provided by Chris Lamont Brown after the event.

"Education is key to environmental justice. We see education as a two-way exchange—anyone can be an educator by sharing their story, and anyone can be a student by being willing to listen and learn…Our goal is to make sure that our research is actionable and that it can drive real change in communities. But research alone isn't enough—it's also about telling the story in ways that surprise and engage people… Finally, it's important to note that communities thrive when they have strong networks. The work we do isn't just about building new networks but also strengthening the ones we already have. Sometimes it's about telling the same story in a new way, and that's how we can continue to expand our reach and make lasting change."
— Dr. Chris Lamont Brown

Examples given:

- Dr. Lamont Brown shared that one of the most innovative projects that the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network has developed is called Spidey Sens-r (link). This project allows communities, especially those in rural areas with limited access to reliable Wi-Fi, or external power, to monitor air quality by collecting spider webs. Spider webs naturally collect dust and contaminants, which can then be analyzed to reveal the quality of the air. This is especially helpful in places where government air monitors aren't always available or aren't placed near sources of contamination.
- Through Spidey Sens-r, North Carolina Environmental Justice Network teaches communities how to identify and collect spider webs, which not only serves as a fun and educational activity but also gives people the power to tell their own environmental story. For many in these communities, this is a way to prove that the illnesses they are suffering from are related to environmental contamination, not their lifestyle as they've been told.
- Spidey Sens-r offers a chance for intergenerational learning. Elders and young people work together on these air quality monitoring activities, which creates a sense of connection to the land and each other. Another important aspect of Spidey Sens-r is that it helps connect the dots between education and activism. It's not just about gathering data, it's also about helping communities stand up for themselves and advocate for change. The joy of discovery, of learning something new and surprising, helps fuel the long fight for environmental justice. (link)

1 Chris Lamont Brown, formerly Chris Hawn

Panel 2 Presentation by Don Hardy

Summary: **Don Hardy, Mayor of Kinston, North Carolina, Chairman of North Carolina Mayors Association Board of Directors, Vice Chairman, National League of Cities, and Member of African American Mayors Association.**



Don Hardy during his presentation.

Summary of excerpts from the presentation:

- Community mobilization and environmental justice are deeply interconnected. At their core, grassroots efforts often drive initiatives for change, particularly in marginalized communities.
- Community mobilization is about organizing and engaging local residents to address issues that directly impact their lives. It's about empowering communities to advocate for their rights and push for social change.
- In the context of environmental justice, mobilization can lead to significant improvements in local environmental conditions, public health, and overall quality of life.
- Environmental justice ensures that no group—especially marginalized, low-income communities—bears a disproportionate share of environmental hazards. This issue is especially relevant in high-distress, Tier 1 communities across our state and nation.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Key elements that are important to focus on for environmental justice strategy include:
- Building alliances and forming coalitions with other communities and advocacy groups to strengthen our collective voice.
- Lobbying for legislative changes and holding governments and corporations accountable.
- Engaging in direct action, including peaceful protests, community cleanups, and other grassroots activities that address immediate environmental concerns.
- Community-driven solutions, including empowering local leaders and activists to initiate change, leverage environmental laws to hold polluters accountable, and promote sustainable development that doesn't sacrifice environmental health.
- Providing healthcare and monitoring for environmental health impacts.
- Partnering with academic institutions and government agencies to leverage expertise and resources.
- Crafting policies that directly address the needs and challenges of marginalized communities and ensure that these communities have a voice in the decision-making process.
- Allocating more funding to environmental justice initiatives.
- Organizing, educating, and advocating for communities that confront disproportionate environmental burdens.
- Coming together regionally so that advocacy work is not done in isolation but in solidarity, across regions, to have the most powerful impact. We must reach out to local government representatives and voice our concerns as a unified force.

Examples given:

- Disproportionate Impact: Marginalized communities often live closer to polluting industries, landfills, and other environmental hazards. This exposure leads to higher risks of health problems and environmental damage.
- Lack of Resources: Marginalized communities have limited access to legal support, funding, and technical expertise to combat environmental injustice. The absence of political representation makes it harder for them to influence decisions that affect their environment.

- Economic Pressures: Marginalized communities may feel forced to accept environmentally harmful industries for job creation and economic development, despite the long-term health costs.
- Weak Enforcement and Regulatory Gaps: Often, there is inadequate regulation or weak enforcement of environmental laws, leaving vulnerable communities unprotected.
- Climate Change: Marginalized communities are hit hardest by the impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and other environmental stressors.

Open Dialogue on Opportunities for Environmental Trilateral Cooperation: Can We Think about Environmental Justice from a Regional North American Perspective?



Felicia Marcus, JPAC member and dialogue moderator, speaking during the open dialogue session.

Summary: This open dialogue was comprised of audience members who shared their recommendations for advancing North American environmental justice with a panel of JPAC members, including Esteban Escamilla Prado, Felicia Marcus, Octaviana V. Trujillo, Robert W. Varney, and Cessia Esther Chuc Uc. Facilitated by Felicia Marcus, the prompting questions were:

1. Can we think of environmental justice from a regional perspective in North America?
2. What do you think the three governments can do as a region to elevate the understanding of environmental justice, both in terms of process and practice, and to take action to create tools that can help environmental justice communities be more effective in addressing their issues?
3. How can we help agencies become more effective in integrating this thinking into all the work they do?

Key highlights & takeaways:

- James Hopkins, a law professor from the University of Arizona, mentioned the challenge of access to information regarding chemical maximum exposure levels across the three countries, as they not only use different units of measurement, but also different standards and aggregates of measurement. He recommended a shared resource with the maximum exposure levels in standardized conversions, as well as a resource with a floorboard of standards. Varney agreed that harmonization of data is imperative to aggregating and modelling data effectively across the three countries, and also consistent with past CEC efforts, and reaffirmed the value of a compilation of standards across North America.
- Similarly, Ramon Rico Murrieta, an environmental consultant in Mexico and the United States, articulated the challenges of homogenous cooperation across the three countries due to differing legal and jurisdictional systems, languages, and measurements. He stated that an EPA course on interpreting environmental laws and regulations had aided him as a professional, and would help politicians, technicians, and NGOs in creating and understanding laws.
- A third speaker recommended the CEC become a stronger data/information creator.
- Two audience members spoke about the interconnection between environmental justice and labor rights, particularly for agricultural migrant workers who lack protection.

- Leticia Zavala from *El Futuro Es Nuestro* (The Future Is Ours), a North Carolina-based farm worker rights group, mentioned that multiple workers had passed away the previous year due to extreme heat. She mentioned the tragic case of José Arturo Gonzalez Mendoza, a Mexican father on a US work visa, who passed away within his first couple weeks on a North Carolina farm after displaying signs of heat exhaustion but was forced to continue working under heat stress. Yesenia Cuello from North Carolina Focused on Increasing Education, Leadership, and Dignity (NCFIELD), a non-profit lead by and for farm workers, also iterated similar challenges.
- Yesenia Cuello, from NCFIELD, also emphasized the importance of addressing community needs before demanding political advocacy. She asserted that, while advocacy needs to be done by those closest to the issue, it is unrealistic to expect advocacy from people experiencing significant financial and time constraints.
- Jessica Lee, a young professional from California, asked the panelists what the three countries could do to prepare youth for climate and environmental participation opportunities in political and legal spaces, minimizing liabilities and maximizing effectiveness. JPAC member Felicia Marcus affirmed the need for knowledge translation and environmental education that caters to youth, as well as other marginalized demographics, to support youth in navigating advocacy and policy spaces with a sufficient understanding to be effective and not tokenized.
- José, a representative from "We Are Water," a project between Indigenous communities in Mexico and Canada focused on hydraulic issues, articulated the need for increased communications about how the three countries' policies and economic activity affect the other countries, particularly when the activities perpetuate inequality. In particular, he emphasized how though many Mexicans know about the harm of Canadian mining in Mexico, very few Canadians are aware of these impacts; this lack of awareness reduces domestic public pressure on source countries' governments and corporations. He concluded by asserting that the CEC should not only focus on ecosystem interconnectedness across the three countries, but also on economic and political interconnectedness. In response, JPAC member Felicia Marcus mentioned the CEC has done some work on this topic, including the "lead-acid battery reports and work that the CEC did based on public requests illuminated that industry" though she recognized that media traction is low.



An audience member asked a question during the open dialogue.

- Similarly, an audience member highlighted the importance of increasing trans-boundary solidarity and collectivity with others, suggesting that the public across the three countries needs to unite against unjust power structures, and suggested a communications or social marketing strategy to do so.
- Dr. Danilynn Hunter from the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network (NCEJN) highlighted how the US federal recognition system significantly hinders Indigenous tribes' access to power, resources, and legal rights, limiting their ability to protect biodiversity and environmental health, and implicitly suggested that the three countries need to reevaluate the bureaucratic barriers to Indigenous climate action. As an example of an alternative, Valerie Ann Johnson from NCEJN highlighted the Yesah "Rights of Nature" Tribunal, held by the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, the first Indigenous-led tribunal of its kind in global history. Via testimonies from witnesses experts, the tribunal indicted the Mountain Valley Pipeline "based on the provisions of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of

Closing Remarks by Esteban Escamilla, 2024 JPAC Chair

Nature, ILO Convention 169, the United Nations and OAS Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on Biodiversity, and the jurisprudence issued by the Inter-American Human Rights System and the UN human rights framework, as well as the legislation of the United States of America, and the legislation and jurisprudence advancing the rights of Nature in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, Panama among others." JPAC member Felicia Marcus affirmed the need for the EJ community to continue "scaffolding", building ideological common-sense consensus across the public (e.g., for the Rights of Nature, the human right to water policy passed by California) to leverage public pressure and push for legislative change.

- JPAC member Cessia Esther Chuc Uc highlighted non-enforcement of international treaties as a key environmental justice obstacle.
- JPAC member Robert Varney highlighted that though there is a huge challenge ahead, the environmental justice community has achieved much. He also highlighted that people tend to support what they help create, and thus, engaging community members—especially those who are typically left out—builds community buy-in and sustainability.
- 2024 JPAC Chair Esteban Escamilla Prado suggested that in addition to remedying unjust global markets that enable pollution and environmental damage, the CEC and EJ communities begin to identify ways to change the global market to favor products that are sustainable, carbon-capturing, biodiversity-protecting, and produced by Indigenous communities, e.g. shade-grown coffee produced in Mexico that does not rely on agrochemicals the way sun-grown coffee does.

Summary: **The JPAC Chair for 2024, Esteban Escamilla, recapped lessons from the day.**

Select excerpts from presentation:

Quote by Esteban Escamilla was obtained by simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English.

"As we mentioned during the day, your feedback is of great importance for us and will be instrumental in preparing our recommendations to the Council."



JPAC members during the open dialogue. Pictured from left to right: Esteban Escamilla Prado, Felicia Marcus, Robert W. Varney, Octaviana V. Trujillo, and Cessia Esther Chuc Uc.



Day 2
June 25, 2024

Day 2 featured a CEC Presentation on environmental justice work, a youth panel highlighting generational perspectives across North America, and concluded with an expert roundtable discussion on the unique histories and trajectories of environmental justice and its evolution across Canada, Mexico and the United States.

CEC Presentation on the Air Quality Improvement for Environmental Justice Project

Summary: Elizabeth Campos Sanchez, of the Environmental Quality Unit at the CEC, introduced a trilateral, community-based initiative focused on monitoring and reducing black carbon emissions across North America, aiming to improve air quality and environmental justice through localized, culturally rooted collaborations.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- The initiative fills data and governance gaps in community air quality monitoring. While traditional air monitoring stations are limited and costly, the initiative leverages low-cost sensors to empower communities to generate and control their own air quality data.
- Black carbon is a critical but under-monitored pollutant. As a component of $PM_{2.5}$ with global climate implications—especially in Arctic regions and to glaciers more generally—black carbon is rarely included in community monitoring due to technical limitations, which this initiative seeks to overcome.
- Three diverse pilot communities reflect distinct environmental and social contexts: Aamjiwnaang First Nation (Sarnia, Ontario, Canada), Tosepan Cooperative (Cuetzalan, Puebla, Mexico), and *Comité Cívico del Valle* (Civic Committee of the Valley) (Imperial County, California, United States) each bring unique challenges and strengths, from industrial pollution to rural firewood reliance and cross-border inequities.
- The project supports Indigenous- and community-lead models of environmental governance. Initiatives like "Energy for Yeknemilis" in Mexico embody alternative, culturally grounded approaches to energy and health, while Aamjiwnaang and *Comité Cívico del Valle* emphasize self-determination and policy influence through grassroots data collection.
- Collaboration and knowledge sharing strengthen cross-border environmental justice. By linking organizations with deep local ties, the initiative fosters technical exchange and shared learning, with the goal of creating long-term, regionally relevant air quality solutions and contributing to wider policy dialogues.

CEC Presentation on the North American PRTR Initiative and Demonstration of the Taking Stock Online Website and Database

Day 2

Summary: **Danielle Valle, of the Environmental Quality unit at the CEC, presented on the North American Pollutant Release and Transfer Register (PRTR) Initiative (link), a vital regional collaborative project that empowers communities with transparent, comparable data on industrial pollution across Canada, the United States, and Mexico to support environmental justice and pollution prevention.**



Danielle Vallée chatting with other participants at the Council Session.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- PRTRs are national registers of industrial facilities reporting on- and off-site pollutant release and transfers. As such, PRTRs are tools for public right-to-know and accountability, promoting transparency and informed decision-making.
- The initiative is rooted in environmental justice, with PRTRs that were created to address community concerns about industrial pollution, especially in marginalized and Indigenous areas.
- The United States established its PRTR, Toxic Inventory Release, in 1986. Canada established its PRTR, the National Pollutant Release Inventory, in 1993. The North American PRTR Initiative was created in 1994 with the establishment of the CEC. Mexico established its own mandatory PRTR, the *Registro de Emisiones y Transferencia de Contaminantes* (Pollutant Emissions and Transfer Registry), in 2006.
- The CEC's North American PRTR Initiative uses data harmonization to enhance cross-border impact; the CEC's Taking Stock platform integrates and standardizes data from 40,000 facilities, allowing users to compare pollution trends across North America and support cross-border environmental analysis. This interactive platform provides graphics, facility-specific details, and pollutant summaries for use by community members, researchers, and policymakers.
- The initiative is continually evolving, as the platform is updated regularly with new data, features like greenhouse gas tracking, and an action plan to ensure continued improvement in data quality, comparability, and community engagement.

Examples given:

- Danielle Valle referenced the Bhopal, India disaster of 1984, in which The Union Carbide chemical manufacturing plant exposed nearly half a million people to methyl isocyanate, a toxic gas, leading to thousands of deaths and disabilities.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- 1986 United States Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act, which act supports public access to information on the use and release of chemicals in communities and led to the development or establishment of the first PRTR, known as the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) in the United States.
- Danielle Valle mentioned the Aarhus Convention, Escazú Agreement, and Kyiv Protocol as legal instruments that support PRTRs through focus on access to information, public participation, and environmental justice.

Keynote Addresses & Youth Panel: Bridging the Gap

Summary: The session opened with three keynote addresses by Prof. La'Meshia Whittington, Dr. Benjamin Chavis, and Michael S. Regan, Administrator of the US EPA. The keynotes were followed by a youth panel on the generational fight for environmental justice, touching on the importance of youth engagement in communities across North America to address environmental justice.

Keynote by Prof. La'Meshia Whittington

Summary: Professor La'Meshia Whittington traced the deep historical roots of environmental injustice to colonialism, genocide, slavery, and systemic extraction, asserting that today's environmental justice movement is both an ancestral mandate and a youth-led act of resistance grounded in Indigenous and Black liberation.



Professor La'Meshia Whittington speaking during her presentation.

Select excerpts from presentation:

Quotes by Professor La'Meshia Whittington:

"The call that came from my community and so many communities like ours across this great continent were of the practices of protecting Mother Earth and her children. It was understood that to poison water is to poison our mother, but subsequently it would poison us in return."

"The environmental justice movement is not just a theme; it is our lifestyle. It is our destiny. It is our manifestation. It is our resistance. It's in our blood. It just now has a name, thanks to elders here in North Carolina. I'm very proud to join Dr. Chavis, who I have the honor of introducing here. He was a part of birthing the movement here in Eastern North Carolina....The cry is for justice. That's what we're still trying to recognize. We don't have the justice yet or there would be no need for this convening. We are fighting environmental injustices. Those injustices on this continent came for my people in the form of the Native American, Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous holocaust. We saw this acquisition and this theft of land. It was for the natural resources, the wealth of Mother Earth. It was moving the people off of that earth in order to ascertain what could be a financial economic bedrock for the establishment of what we now know as our nation as it is. But then as the land was being gathered by pushing people off forcibly, and moving tribes and separating families, it was the question of 'now that we have all of this acreage, who will work this acreage?' And so now we see that natural resources also include the children of Mother Earth."

"You are convening now on the Earth that our ancestors once loved and toiled in peace. Then came a struggle of maintaining the earth, the struggle of maintaining our culture. ... We are intertwined; we are not separated. We are not segregated....I am a youth. We are doing the work as we are speaking. We're not idealogging, we are not fantasizing. We are not theoretically saying that we are coming. We are here. We are present. This is a millennial [indicating herself], co-founder of an organization with a Gen-Z co-founder telling you exactly what I know about my people and history."

"Isn't it interesting that a manufacturing plantation hundreds of years ago is a manufacturing corporation today? Isn't it interesting that an industrial plantation of yester-year is an industrial corporation today? And we wonder why people who are working in poultry plants, we wonder why people who are working as farm hands, as farm workers, we wonder why people who are in these hog CAFO



Audience listening to presentation by Professor La'Meshia Whittington.

[Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations] industrial corporations, are the last when it comes to protection for healthcare, the first communities to catch COVID-19 when it came through, we wonder why we call it 'slave wages'—where do we think the term came from? It's because 'Plantation to Corporation,' it was always this way, because it was the extraction of our natural resources and our mother earth."

"We heard leaders through the generations talking about 'there's poison in our water; there is poison in our air'. Even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in prison in the late 1960s, saying that there was polluted air. He wrote: 'My people are gasping in polluted air and poisoned water.' And then only a few short years later, the environmental justice movement was birthed calling out that very atrocity."

"We are bound together not just in a system of oppression, but in a system of resistance."

"There is no coincidence that over 56% of all people of color in the United States are living only three miles from a toxic hazardous waste area—that could be a landfill, that could be an industrial corporation—it is not a coincidence. It is because, from Plantation to Corporation, Jim Crow segregation lines made these communities cheaper for landfills to be dumped into, cheaper for communities to see that 'well wait a minute, I need a job, but this corporation isn't offering me benefits, but I need the money now even though I may get cancer later' and it is because of that plantation to corporation system."

"We are leading the way. We are rectifying the past. We are rectifying the atrocities that communities are still burdened by. The air is still polluted. What we think is: an environmental justice issue quickly becomes everyone's issue because water flows and air blows….The whole world is polluted by PFAS. We are bound together, not just in a system of oppression, but in a system of resistance."

"I'm very proud to introduce Dr. Benjamin Franklin Chavis, who I had the pleasure of meeting alongside my family years ago, an African American civil right leader and icon."

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Prof. Whittington asserted that the environmental justice movement is a legacy of resistance rooted in ancestral struggle, emphasizing the ties between poisoned land and water, the theft of Indigenous territories, the enslavement of Afro-Indigenous peoples, and the present-day fight to protect communities from ongoing harm.
- Whittington argued that the extractive economy has not disappeared but instead changed from "Plantation to Corporation," drawing a direct line between historical plantation systems and modern-day industrial and manufacturing sectors, where low-wage workers—often people of color—still bear disproportionate environmental and health burdens.
- Environmental justice is not a theme but a lived reality for communities still fighting for clean air and water, as she highlighted that over 56% of people of color in the United States live within three miles of a hazardous site and are forced to choose between immediate economic survival and long-term health.
- Prof. Whittington underscored her own, and her brother's, role as millennial and Gen Z organizers to display that youth are not the future of the movement—they are its present-day leaders, challenging narratives that frame youth engagement as something on the horizon rather than actively happening now.
- Prof. Whittington referred to environmental racism as the unifying language that emerged from decades of localized struggle, honoring Dr. Chavis and the 1982 Warren County protest for coining the term and catalyzing the environmental justice movement into a national and global force for equity and survival.



Michael S. Regan, Dr. Benjamin Chavis, and Jorge Daniel Taillant listened to the presentation by Professor La'Meshia Whittington.

Examples given:

- Prof. Whittington mentioned the Native American, Indigenous, and Afro-Indigenous Holocaust on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, stating, "that is the original name, where over 100 to 140 million of my ancestors who did not make it, were either moved through genocide, either physically or through paper."
- To illustrate how connected people are across the three North American countries, as well as link Black and Indigenous exploitation, Prof. Whittington mentioned the Afro-Indigenous Black Seminoles, enslaved Africans from the Gullah region who fled slavery and allied with the Seminole Native American tribes in Florida. Some descendants of the Black Seminoles sought refuge in Mexico, becoming the group known as the Mascogos in Coahuila. "We [Indigenous Peoples] are intertwined, we are not separated, we are not segregated," she said.
- Similarly, Prof. Whittington iterated that while the history of cotton plantations in the United States is well-known, cotton was once the number one plantation crop in Mexico as well.
- Prof. Whittington referred to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s awareness in the 1960s of how Black communities were being exposed to toxic pollution.
- Prof. Whittington referenced the work of the organization she co-founded, Democracy Green, which was able to, with US EPA support, help the community of Samson County, North Carolina get connected to clean drinking water and supporting education in the town of Maysville that led to a new water treatment facility.

Keynote by Dr. Benjamin Chavis

Summary: **Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Executive Director and Host of The Chavis Chronicles, reflected on the intergenerational and global struggle for environmental justice, urging unity, activism, and truth-telling to protect both people and the planet.**



Dr. Benjamin Chavis at the Council Session.

Select excerpts from presentation:

"The subject matter is, Bridging the Gap, a conversation on the inter-generational fight for environmental justice. … We are all a part of one human family. It is the denial of our oneness of our humanity that gives rise to racism, that gives rise to oppression, that gives rise to exploitation that gives rise to the destruction of the environment. When people get together across racial lines, across ethnic lines, across religious lines, across language lines, across national geographical lines, when we get together like we are today it has the potential to make a big difference. …"

"In 1982 I got arrested. I found out that my state had decided to put tons of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in a landfill in the most predominantly black county. … an agriculture community, the last place you want to dig a

hole in the ground and dump tons of PCB-laden soils. It was in the Warren County jail that I got a piece of paper and scribbled out the coinage and the definition of environmental justice. And it wasn't just for Warren County; it was for all counties. And it wasn't just for the United States of America; it was for all nations. That's why I'm so pleased to see Canada, the United States, and Mexico do something positive and transformative together. The fact that you're having a youth panel engenders renewed hope. Our young people today in Canada, the United States and Mexico, and throughout the world, want to make our world a better place. Some of the early champions against climate change are young people."

"When we're talking about environmental justice, we're talking about a struggle over life and death. When we're talking about climate change, we're talking about the struggle of life and death. And if you don't remember anything I say, remember this. We have to choose life over the death and destruction of those people."

"I want to solute Canada for making a law and getting it through parliament… the Environmental Justice Act. Public policy and laws are important. The challenge is to make sure that decision makers and policy makers get informed by people who live in the community to which and on which the policies will be adhered to. Sometimes the environmental justice movement gets characterized as a bunch of protesters. … We're protesting because we want to see people have a better quality of life, we're protesting because we want to see people have clean and fresh water to drink. We're protesting because we want to see everyone able to breathe, without pollution."

"Since this is a trilateral conference, … even though we have these different governmental jurisdictions, we're all one people. That's why I always like to pay tribute to my Indigenous brothers and sisters. … At our First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. in 1991, we adopted 17 principles of environmental justice, and the first principle is about the sacredness of the Earth. I didn't say the politics of the Earth or the economics of the Earth, but the sacredness of the Earth. Because if we knew how sacred the Earth is, that would inform our politics, that would inform our economics, that would inform our social consciousness."

"I'm optimistic… because you're here and we're here to hopefully come out of this conference with an action agenda, that will help propel and help increase the effectiveness of the environmental justice movement all over the world. You don't know how gratifying it is to know that what we did decades ago was not in vain. … Each generation has to rise to the occasion. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. We should learn from our past and not repeat our past. … We need the truth. As I began my presentation, we're all one human family. …"

"The greatest tragedy since the beginning of time is for mankind not to see that we are all part of one family. And our refusal to claim the oneness of our humanity contributes to our refusal to see the oneness of God's creation. The oceans are named different oceans, but they're one ocean. There are different continents, but it's all a part of one land." …

"We learned early on to articulate and express our connection. … We did statistical research of every zip code in America, including Alaska and Hawaii. … We wanted to know if there is a correlation between communities of color and where all these toxic waste facilities and toxic industries are. Our research showed that the number one determinant factor in the United States of America is race. It wasn't poverty. It was race. And that study, Toxic Waste and Race, from 1987, stands today as the landmark piece of research and because of the study we pulled everybody together."

"When we had the people together, the established environmental movement was against it. The Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Defense Fund, and the National Wildlife Federation said we could not have a meeting like that. And we had the meeting, but we also invited them. We learned something. This is not just a struggle of one racial group against another racial group. When you talk about saving the world from environmental hazards you have to be concerned about all communities and about all people." …

"Out of this conference can come renewed hope, some renewed determination to keep fighting to keep struggling. Yes, we have to fight for environmental justice. If you fight, then we can negotiate. But if you don't fight, we don't have anything to negotiate. So, in all of our communities in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, we have to fight for justice.

We have to fight for equality. We have to fight for equity. And we have to fight to affirm the oneness of our humanity."

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Dr. Chavis recounted the origins of the environmental justice movement, calling back to the 1982 protests in Warren County, North Carolina—sparked by the state's decision to dump PCB-contaminated soil in a predominantly Black community—which led him to coin the term environmental racism, emphasizing that this movement began as a life-or-death response to systemic environmental racism.
- Dr. Chavis highlighted the intersection of civil rights and environmental advocacy, drawing on his history in the civil rights movement to underline that the denial of our shared humanity fuels racism, environmental destruction, and inequality—making solidarity across borders, generations, and identities essential.
- Dr. Chavis highlighted the landmark 1987 study Toxic Wastes and Race, which revealed that race—not income—was the strongest predictor of where hazardous waste sites were located in the United States, underscoring the need for evidence-based policy shaped by frontline communities.
- He praised the leadership of young people in the climate and justice movements, affirming that today's youth are not only inheriting the struggle but are already shaping solutions, and must be supported by the experience and resources of older generations.
- Urging attendees to fight for justice, pass strong environmental laws, resist revisionist history, and prioritize voter turnout, Dr. Chavis stressed that environmental justice is not just about protests, it's about ensuring every community has access to clean air, water, and a dignified life.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- 1987 study Toxic Wastes and Race by the Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ (link)

Keynote by Michael S. Regan, Administrator of the US EPA

Summary: **Using the theme of "Bridging the Generational Gap," Michael S. Regan, Administrator of US EPA, gave remarks connecting the environmental movement of the past with the environmental movement of the present and future, thanking previous and current generations, and encouraging strategic action from the new generation.**



Michael S. Regan, Administrator of the US EPA, during the Council Session.

Select excerpts from presentation:

Quotes by Michael S. Regan:

"Thank you Dr. Chavis for those words of inspiration. We are all products of our environment. And the 1980s were interesting years....I recall my parents watching the news and cheering on that troublemaker in Warren County, North Carolina, standing up for those folks who were being dumped on. Thank you, Dr. Chavis, for the early inspiration."

"I've been fascinated with environmental protection and public health and that nexus with environmental justice for a long time....I understand the opportunity that young people have to start early. To begin to let those ideas and thoughts marinate. But also understand that you're not the first to come and really understand your history so that you can take advantage of the steps taken by those like Dr. Chavis that came before us."

"I'm also very inspired by Professor [La'Meshia] Whittington, the intellect, the intensity and intentionality, and the time she's taken to educate herself… It's very inspirational that as a leader, she is someone that I can call on at any time, there is no problem too big or too small that she doesn't want to engage on....Thank you for your leadership…and for exuding the pride."

"As young people, you all have an obligation to understand what your role is. It's one thing to be upset, to be angry, or want to take action. That's good. But you also have to know and understand that there is a role to play, that there's power in numbers, what the roles of your colleagues are, and how you plan to attack the system in a very efficient, effective, and strategic manner is of the utmost importance because this climate emergency is here now. We don't have a lot of time to waste."

"Please understand that you have a lot to say, you have a lot to share but open your ears as you have a lot to learn and a lot of people to listen to…We have to attack these problems at every level—whether it's through advocacy, philanthropy, law and justice, or politics and public service. Young people need to have people infiltrating every aspect of those levels so that you can converge and leverage that power, ensuring you're not slaves to political whims. We need to understand how to own our power. We need to understand how to capture power."

"Think collectively. You are the movement. How are you going to take advantage of this moment? The time is now. There is a sense of urgency. Our young people have a lot of energy. Let's get at it and let's go! Thank you."

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Administrator Regan thanked past, present, and future generations of environmental advocates, and encouraged the present generation to learn from the past in order to avoid replicating mistakes and instead be more effective.
- He emphasized his own experience coming from the community of Goldsboro, North Carolina, and the disproportionate effects of environmental racism in his community, to make the point that environmental justice work starts at home.
- He also emphasized the importance of knowing one's own and fellow colleagues' roles, and that there is power in numbers, in order to be strategic and effective in environmental advocacy.

Examples given:

- Administrator Regan thanked Jesse Jackson Jr., Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and Reverend William Barber, as source of inspiration for environmental justice work in his formative years. He also thanked Professor La'Meshia Whittington as a present source of inspiration, and the Biden Administration for putting $3 billion [US$] toward environmental justice and climate justice.

Youth Panel

Summary: **Moderated by Professor La'Meshia Whittington, this panel brought together six youth environmental experts from Canada, Mexico, and the United States to discuss their work, perspectives on environmental justice, and suggestions for moving ahead.**

Panelists are as follows.

From Canada:

- Iman A Berry, Co-Founder of Green Ummah and Migration and Climate Change Contact Point of the Youth Constituency at UFCCC
- Katia Forgues, Co-Director of Sustainable Youth Canada and member of Environment and Climate Change Canada's Youth Council.

From Mexico:

- Fátima Zúñiga, student of Renewable Natural Resources Engineering at Universidad Autónoma Chapingo
- Sacnité Acosta, Co-Founder and Co-Leader of Legado GAIA (LEGAIA).

From the United States:

- Cameron E. Oglesby, Environmental Justice Advocate and Storyteller
- Colton Buckley, Chief Executive Officer of National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils and Administrator of EPA National Environmental Youth Advisory Council.

Select excerpts from presentation:

"I believe we were born at the right time to be able to help, collaborate, and do our part in this common fight. We must understand that we are interdependent; it's not just us or nature. Nature is not separate from us; it is part of us, and we are part of it. And that's it."
— Fátima Zúñiga, quote obtained by simultaneous translation from Spanish to English



Colton Buckley during the panel discussion.



Cameron E Oglesby during the panel discussion.

"I sat there and saw the solutions they are developing within their community. They don't rely on institutional help; it's mutual aid. It's people coming to each other's aid. They're building collective power and sharing resources in ways that probably predate modern political institutions."
— Cameron E. Oglesby

"I want to honor and humanize the very real impact and trauma you all are bearing on this stage for the hope of a better tomorrow. You're giving policy updates, but these are also your stories. We don't need to disassociate from what we're living."
— Prof. La'Meshia Whittington

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Colton Buckley shared that many of the people in this fight (i.e., the fight for environmental justice) have heard that we can't enact environmental policies because they affect economic decisions. But in rural America, when an environmental issue occurs, it wipes out that economy, and you can't just flip a switch and reverse it. We've got to put our dollars where our mouths are and focus on fixing those environmental issues and mitigating them now so we're not forcing people in rural communities, or disproportionately affected areas, to abandon the economic footsteps of their parents and grandparents.
- Cameron Oglesby reflected on how the environmental movement has evolved to more seriously grapple with justice, particularly following the 2020 racial reckoning sparked by George Floyd's murder in the United States. She stated that this moment catalyzed a shift toward "intersectional environmentalism," pushing mainstream environmentalism to better acknowledge the interconnectedness of racial justice, human rights, and ecological well-being.
- Colton Buckley shared that we have got to move in a unified effort to stand together to represent communities facing environmental burdens. The policies being enacted—or retained—keep power away from the powerless. The only way to move forward is by building broad coalitions.
- Iman Berry highlighted how the environmental movement has evolved from a perceived conflict between environmental action and economic concerns into a call for intersectional equity, emphasizing the urgent need for improved public understanding, education, and global justice in climate policy.



Iman A Berry.

- Fátima Zúñiga underscores the disconnect between environmental policies and their implementation in Mexico, stressing the importance of youth and Indigenous inclusion in political decision-making, and a deeper recognition of our interdependence with nature.
- Katia Forgues pointed to a growing public awareness—particularly post-pandemic—of the link between environmental and public health issues, with youth-led movements in Montreal catalyzing broader engagement and normalizing environmental activism.



Katia Forgues during the panel discussion.

Expert Roundtable with the CEC Executive Director: Environmental Justice: Origins, Evolution and Emerging Policy in North America



The Youth Panel.

- Colton Buckley highlighted how racial and economic inequalities exacerbate environmental injustices, particularly in rural and marginalized communities that lack the political power and infrastructure to withstand or recover from climate disasters. He argued that effective policy solutions must include dedicated public funding, inclusive representation, and proactive investment in vulnerable areas to prevent long-term displacement and economic collapse.
- Cameron Oglesby acknowledged that many governmental and institutionalized solutions perpetuate a status quo that has not worked for environmental justice communities. She emphasized that communities are already building their own solutions, via collective power, mutual aid and resource-sharing.
- Sacnité Acosta highlighted how "Day Zero," the day when Mexico will not have any free supply of water, has already existed for rural and outskirt communities, with many people—predominantly women—already in vulnerable situations of having to buy and transport water. She also highlighted how people are violently repressed criminalized for defending their territories and organizing to solve environmental issues. As such, she emphasized solidarity and the importance of resistance, while also noting that communities should be allowed to build and solve, rather than forced to resist.

Summary: **This roundtable focused on past, present and emerging efforts to promote environmental justice in North America, particularly in the context of the triple planetary crisis: climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. The invited experts were asked to share their views on similarities and divergence in the understanding of EJ across the United States, Mexico and Canada. The panel also reflected on how EJ actions, such as improving access to information, promoting meaningful participation, and the passage of EJ laws, policies, and programs can help tackle environmental inequities suffered by historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities facing polluted air, contaminated water, extreme heat, drought, severe weather events, flooding, food scarcity, and other intersectional vulnerabilities. The experts on the panel included:**

- Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Executive Director and Host of The Chavis Chronicles
- Kenneth Martin, Director of American Indian Environmental Office at US EPA
- Eriel Deranger, Executive Director and Founder of Indigenous Climate Action
- Amanda Monforton, Director of Environment and Climate Change Canada Policy Development
- Octavio Rosas Landa, Professor at Universidad Autónoma de México
- Marco Polo Huitrón Bernáldez, Director of Federal Infractions Against the Environment at Profepa.



Eriel Deranger during the panel discussion.



Amanda Monforton during the panel discussion.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Dr. Benjamin Chavis explained that we need to learn from the past. We're not trying to redesign colonialism. When Mandela came out of prison in South Africa, he wasn't trying to reform apartheid; it had to be dismantled. The economic systems that contribute to our suffering have to be dismantled at some point.
- Dr. Chavis emphasized that while significant progress has been made in advancing environmental justice over the past decades—particularly in building unity and mutual respect across communities—this progress has consistently faced backlash and repression. He warned of ongoing efforts to distort history and deny systemic injustices, urging continued resistance against revisionism and a global, intergenerational commitment to truth, justice, and solidarity in the environmental movement.
- Dr. Benjamin Chavis shared the following, referring to the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC: Well, I recall that none of us went and asked our governments for permission. We decided we were going to have this meeting], and it turned out to be fruitful and productive, with long-range impact. Sometimes, Indigenous people and grassroots people want to get government sanction for what we do, but I think the government ought to get sanction from Indigenous People. We need to flip the script, because if you allow public policy to only come from the government down to the people, the interests of the people won't be served in terms of change. But when it comes from the grassroots up, and we start getting people from the grassroots into government to change and transform it, then we have a greater chance of success.
- Amanda Monforton shared that the federal government doesn't own the environmental justice space at all; they do not own the environmental justice movement, and it's about going back to those people that are actually impacted and those ones that are experiencing those burdens, ensuring that those voices and those stories and the lived experiences come to the decision-making table and that is informing decisions that are being made.
- Amanda Monforton highlighted that Canada's newly passed environmental justice law marks a major milestone, requiring the government to develop and update a national strategy every five years to address environmental racism and advance environmental justice. She emphasized that the law's passage—driven by a decade of grassroots advocacy—represents a rare and significant success for community-led efforts influencing federal legislation. This moment, she noted, signals a promising and hopeful shift in Canada's approach to environmental justice.
- Marco Polo Huitrón Bernáldez emphasized that Profepa's approach to environmental justice in Mexico is grounded in two key rights: access to justice and a healthy environment—both of which must be pursued in partnership with Indigenous communities. He stressed that true environmental justice is only possible when government officials recognize and respect the vital role of Indigenous Peoples in protecting their lands and natural resources. Collaboration and accountability, he noted, are essential to achieving shared goals of conservation and justice.
- Eriel Deranger explained that Indigenous environmental justice diverges from mainstream environmental justice by seeking not just reforms within colonial systems, but the advancement of Indigenous sovereignty, autonomy, and self-determined governance rooted in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. While Indigenous communities may engage with state-led environmental justice initiatives as a form of mitigation, their ultimate goal is to build independent systems

grounded in reciprocal relationships with land, animals, and ecosystems. This approach reframes justice as collective and relational—not solely human-centered—and envisions futures beyond colonial and capitalist paradigms.

- Eriel Deranger shared that Indigenous Peoples are not necessarily always interested in tweaking colonial systems, governments, policies, and laws. But that doesn't mean Indigenous Peoples are not participating. Indigenous Peoples are mitigating impacts through colonial systems, while also advancing their own systems.
- Eriel Deranger shared that visibility is critical, but it has to be a step toward our liberation, which requires decolonization and dismantling these systems and structures. Environmental justice, as a framework, is part of the tools in the tool shed, it's not the goal. The goal is to create new, equitable systems for everyone.
- Eriel Deranger explained that the current structures maintain unequal and unjust relationships with Indigenous Peoples, Black people, other people of color, and communities of color in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. These structures—like the Doctrine of Discovery, the domestic dependent nationhood, the trust doctrine, the plenary power doctrine, and other archaic structures—are the foundations of the legal frameworks in which we exist. Unless we talk about dismantling the foundations of these countries, no tweaking of the system is going to work.
- Eriel Deranger explained that our relationship with where we come from is key. Eriel shared the following: I am Dene, and the word Dene, when you break it down, means to flow from the earth. We are people that have relationships. We [Dene] are Caribou people, and we have interrelationships with the places that have defined who we are as people. When we talk about environmental justice, we are talking about—at least in my territory—justice for the caribou, justice for the river systems, justice for the plants and the medicines and the trees. It is not that we are separate from those things, but we are one and the same. When we protect the caribou, we protect ourselves. When we protect the quality of life for the caribou, it protects the quality of life for who we are. When the animals and the land are sick, we are sick.



Kenneth Martin during the panel discussion.

- Eriel Deranger shared that we should want to operate outside and create alternative futures to the futures in colonial capitalist systems that we have been locked into for the last 500-plus years.
- Kenneth Martin emphasized that true inclusion means ensuring Indigenous representation in policymaking spaces—not just one voice, but many, reflecting the diversity of Native Nations. While it's been a challenging journey navigating colonial systems, he stressed the importance of continuing to push for meaningful Indigenous participation across the EPA and all levels of government.
- Octavio Rosas Landa emphasized that environmental justice in Mexico is deeply tied to global economic systems, with many local conflicts stemming from trade agreements and corporate actions involving foreign companies. He argued that current legal frameworks are inadequate and that real solutions must be collective, rooted in the leadership and participation of local communities alongside governments, academia, and international agencies. His work, including founding the National Assembly of Environmentally Affected Peoples (*Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales*), highlights the need for transnational, community-centered approaches to address environmental harm.

Official Opening of the 31st Regular Session of the Council

- Octavio Rosas Landa shared: For us, the solution involves local communities. There is no solution without the communities. There's a saying from Indigenous communities in the western part of Mexico: If the solution is not collective, it is not a solution.
- Dr. Benjamin Chavis emphasized the importance of grassroots leadership in driving environmental justice, advocating for change to come from Indigenous and frontline communities rather than waiting for government permission. He highlighted the need to build a movement stronger than the resistance through effective organizing, communication, and trust, with technology playing a crucial role in amplifying efforts. Chavis also stressed the importance of creating clear, actionable plans post-meeting, ensuring accountability and inclusivity, particularly to engage and inspire youth in the ongoing fight for environmental justice.

Examples given:

- Amanda Monforton highlighted the collaborative air quality work that the CEC conducted with Aamjiwnaang First Nation, emphasizing that the project was successful because community members who were most affected were part of the decision-making process.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

Canada's 2024 EJ Law (link)

Summary: **Following the Day 2 session, there was an official opening ceremony in the evening. This ceremony featured Queen Quet, a published author, computer scientist, lecturer, mathematician, historian, columnist, preservationist, environmental justice advocate, environmentalist, film consultant, and "The Art-ivist." Founder, Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition.**



Queen Quet sitting with Michael S. Regan, Administrator of the US EPA, the day of the opening ceremony.



Day 3
June 26, 2024

Day 3 featured presentations by the CEC's Environmental Justice and Climate Resilience (EJ4Climate) grantees, along with presentations by members of the CEC's Communities for Environmental Justice Network (CEJN), and the Generation of Environmental Leaders Program Youth Teams (GELP). These presentations were followed by discussions with the Council and environmental justice experts. The Council is composed of the highest-level environmental authorities (cabinet-level or equivalent) from Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

CEC Presentation on the EJ4Climate Grant Program and Communities for Environmental Justice Network

Summary: **This presentation reviewed the CEC's EJ4Climate community grants program and the CEJN, which was created to engage communities and organizations to facilitate learning and knowledge exchange to support capacity building and to strengthen climate adaptation. The presentation was led by Violaine Pronovost, CEC Community Grant Programs Lead. EJ4Climate grantees and CEJN members also participated to share environmental justice-related stories from the communities they work with. EJ4Climate grantees and CEJN members included:**

- Jackie Medcalf, Executive Director, Texas Health and Environment Alliance
- Orion Kriegman, Founding Executive Director, Boston Food Forest Coalition
- Jeffrey Renfrow, Director, Rio Bravo Restoration
- Perry Mcleod-Shabogesic, Nipissing First Nation
- Jose Torcal, Project Lead, Isla Urbana
- Marley Kozak, National Program Manager, The Resilience Institute
- Jaziel Soto Torres, Cucapá El Mayor Indigenous Community.



Violaine Pronovost moderating the discussion.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Storytelling has the potential to advance environmental justice by giving a voice to the least heard, bringing visibility to issues, and permitting the sharing of community-led expertise and lessons learned. It has the power to drive change, connect people emotionally, share hope, and motivate others that may share similar stories and concerns.
- Through the past three funding cycles, 42 projects from Mexico, Canada, and the United States received financial support from the CEC's EJ4Climate grant program. Those projects were led by communities and local organizations and are addressing specific environmental justice issues.
- In addition to the CEC's EJ4Climate grant program, the CEC also has the North American Partnership for Environmental Community Action, also known as NAPECA. NAPECA was created in 2010 and supports community-led projects that address environmental injustices and involve underserved and vulnerable communities.
- The CEC created the CEJN that supports the exchange of experiences at the community level and practical guidance between organizations. The CEC hosted a traditional workshop for the CEJN in Oaxaca, Mexico, in November 2023. The event had the participation of representatives from 13 organizations and Indigenous communities from North America that address environmental justice, especially in the context of climate change.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- CEC'S EJ4Climate Grants Program (link)
- CEC's NAPECA Grant Program (link)
- CEC Communities for Environmental Justice Network story map and database (link)

Presentation by Jackie Medcalf, Executive Director, Texas Health and Environment Alliance

Summary: Texas Health and Environment Alliance (THEA) is a 2023–2024 EJ4Climate grant recipient for the project Empowering Vulnerable Communities to Prevent Toxic Chemical Exposure from Climate Change Events. Jackie Medcalf shared stories from their community.



Jackie Medcalf during the session.

Summary of excerpts from the presentation:

- In 2011, local news reports claimed that Houston's tap water was radioactive. I had a semester-long case study, so I decided to study the water at my family's home. During this time, I was incredibly sick—I was 50 pounds lighter, losing my hair, had lost the use of both hands, and was having about seven seizures a week. Doctors couldn't figure out what was causing my ailments.
- When I tested our water, I discovered the presence of heavy metals and other contaminants. I had my body tested for heavy metals, and 19 were detected. I started researching like crazy to figure out what was happening in our environment and how we could protect ourselves. I discovered that my family's ranch was nestled between four toxic waste sites, or Superfund sites, and one of them was in the river I grew up swimming, fishing, and boating in.
- It took years to convince the state of Texas to study our health, but when they finally did, they found 17 types of cancer, 14 of which came back at abnormally high rates. Children were losing their vision to a rare eye cancer and even dying from it at over 16 times the state average. They found a rare birth defect where babies were born with their digestive organs outside their bodies. We learned that 30% of pregnancies in my community had at least one adverse health outcome.
- We're working in three communities, helping them combat environmental injustices and clean up old waste sites that endanger public health. These communities are diverse, ranging from communities of color to elderly white communities and communities with many children under the age of five, one of the most vulnerable populations.

Presentation by Orion Kriegman, Founding Executive Director, Boston Food Forest Coalition

Summary: BFFC is a 2023–2024 EJ4Climate grant recipient for the project Community-led Food Forest Development for Climate Resilience in Boston. Orion Kriegman shared stories from their community.



Orion Kriegman discussing his work with Council Members, Mexico Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Semarnat) (Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources) Undersecretary Iván Rico López and Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) Assistant Deputy Minister Sandra McCardell in the Exhibit Area of the Council Session.

Select excerpts from presentation:

Quotes by Orion Kriegman**:**

"We are not going to stop the climate from changing, but we can come together to create justice as it changes. This is perhaps the most overwhelming and the most urgent task of our time."

"As we know, summer 2023 was the hottest on record globally. Summers 2021 and 2022 were the hottest and most humid in Boston. But this heat and humidity is not felt equally due to racism. Boston's Black and brown neighborhoods live in neighborhoods with 20% less parkland, 40% less tree canopy, and an average daytime temperature disparity of 7.5 degrees hotter than predominantly white neighborhoods."

"So, imagine, instead, a Boston where a network of urban parks replaces vacant lots, from Mattapan to Dorchester to East Boston, capturing carbon, capturing rainwater, cooling the urban heat island. The tree canopy provides growing children and their grandparents and everyone in between access to fresh food—all neighbors living within blocks of green space. Imagine a more equitable and climate-resilient Boston."

"When a young man was shot and murdered in front of our growing community orchard, together with his friends and family, we planted a blueberry bush in his honor. A light bulb went off for me. We were growing so much more than food in these spaces. We were growing relationships between neighbors of diverse backgrounds, different cultures and languages, different races and classes. Resilience is knowing each other. But if we did not own the land, all this good work would be uprooted. So, we created a nonprofit community land trust to own the land together in perpetuity, and we named it the Boston Food Forest Coalition."

"We buy the land from the city of Boston for $100, and we hold the deed, so the land is owned by the community in perpetuity. Nature-based design—research shows that urban forests and green canopy, planted thoughtfully, can lower air temperature in city neighborhoods by 10 degrees. Stewardship and education—the same local leaders who design the parks become its stewards, planning soup kitchens, music festivals, birthday parties, and more."

"We believe the culture of the city can be transformed. Imagine every park with its own harvest festival, and every park taking the abundance that it creates, and the stewards have been gifting them through churches and homeless shelters to people in need."

"For me, these food forests are seeds of hope. Hope is not something that we have. It is something that we gift to the Earth, that we water, that we tend, that we support to grow, and we pass it on to the next generation."

Presentation by Perry Mcleod-Shabogesic from the Nipissing First Nation and José Torcal, Project Lead, Isla Urbana



José Torcal during the panel discussion.

Summary: **Perry Mcleod-Shabogesic and José Torcal share information about their project One Water, Somos Agua, a collaboration between Indigenous communities in Mexico and Canada to increase water resilience through rainwater harvesting and led by the NGO Isla Urbana in Mexico and Nipissing First Nation in Canada, which received an EJ4Climate grant in 2022–2023.**

Select excerpts from presentation:

"…Lake Nipissing. It's 20 miles long, about 8 to 10 miles wide, and when I was young, we used to play hockey in the bays and the shores. We used to skate across the lake when it froze over in the fall. Since climate change has happened, we can no longer do that. The ice still forms, but it's not good ice—it's white and weak, full of cracks and bubbles. So, we can't do the things we used to do when I was young. Too, playing hockey in those bays, we would, when we were thirsty, take the blades of our skates and cut holes in the ice and drink the water, and it was fresh and wonderful, beautiful tasting. We can't do that anymore."
— Perry Mcleod-Shabogesic

"First Nations across Canada [often] do not have access to fresh drinking water. So, when the opportunity came to work with One Water, which is a rain harvesting program project, we jumped at the chance. When I was young too, we used to collect rainwater. We called it 'soft water'. We could drink it, we could use it to wash ourselves, to cook—it was part of how we accessed water. But over the years, we got away from that."
— Perry Mcleod-Shabogesic

"As Perry said, the problem of water in Canada when it comes to access by Indigenous peoples and First Nations is extremely serious. It might even be less evident than it is in Mexico where it's tangible that there is a water crisis."
— José Torcal (quote obtained from simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English)



Perry Mcleod-Shabogesic during the session.

"There are other organizations like this, like Isla Urbana, which has been working for over a decade in capturing rainwater all over the country, and they have supported over 30,000 families in becoming water-based self-sufficient. They have been collect-ing the rainwater that falls on the rooftops. Now, as One Water came up in Mexico, we already had very strong-rooted knowledge in our Indigenous communities about how to collect rain-water, and the Nipissing First Nation in Canada has very strong experience in governance, in resource management, and also self-determination. So, the idea behind One Water, or Somos Agua, is that all three communities in Mexico and the Nipissing community can collaborate and exchange their experience."
— José Torcal (quote obtained from simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English)

"As Perry said, this year, all three Indigenous communities from Mexico will travel to the Nipissing First Nation to install three rainwater collection systems, of course adapting to their own historic and climate context in that area in Canada. So, for this next part of the project, we are really excited, and we look forward to our visit and to moving forward."
— José Torcal (quote obtained from simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English)

"That lake has a personality, has a spirit. We know her. Every bay, every island has a story. Each of us has a story and a song, and everything has that, and it's through those songs and ceremony and those vibrations we connect to creation, and we're able to ask for that help. We cannot do this alone. We need help from all beings, not just humans. And it's through our ceremony and our prayers and our songs from across Turtle Island and the world that we need to include that in what we do. It's important. Miigwetch."
— Perry Mcleod-Shabogesic

Presentation by Jeffrey Renfrow, Director Río Bravo Restoration

Summary: Jeffrey Renfrow shared stories from Río Bravo Restoration. Río Bravo Restoration is a 2022–2024 NAPECA grant recipient for the project Socio-environmental Capacity Building for COVID and Climate Change in Rural Communities of the Rio Grande/Bravo.



Jeffrey Renfrow discussing his work in the Exhibit Area after his presentation.

Summary of excerpts from the presentation:

- Jeffrey Renfrow shared that he began to learn about the challenges they faced and the asymmetry of conditions along the border, along the Rio Grande and Río Bravo. These are incredibly resilient and resourceful people, but they live in a place where your only option is to live off the land. The landscape is severely degraded due to overgrazing, climate change, and other challenges. There's no power grid in the area within hundreds of miles, and very limited access to regular infrastructure, fresh water, and food.
- Jeffrey Renfrow explained: We [Río Bravo Restoration] formed a partnership built on trust. We've done a lot of work with solar power to address the lack of electricity. In many places, there were systems that no longer worked because people couldn't afford to replace their batteries. We put solar systems in five schools that had solar systems, but the batteries no longer worked. We've trained people to install solar power, created a buying cooperative to make solar more affordable, fixed solar systems, and done work with gardening to build capacity, helping people get the tools needed for gardening, including water catchment systems.
- Jeffrey Renfrow explained: We [Río Bravo Restoration] created the Grupo Común de Conservación (GCC), a group of local people we've trained to do restoration work. We've trained them on the river, to work upland, and to do monitoring for rare cacti. This has created good-paying work, built enthusiasm and buy-in for future restoration work, and helped build capacity to address severely degraded landscapes and grasslands that no longer support the ranching lifestyle they need to survive.

Presentation by Marley Kozak, National Program Manager, The Resilience Institute

Summary: **Marley Kozak was a participant in the trinational workshop held in Mexico in 2023 under the auspices of the CEC's Communities for Environmental Justice Network project and is sharing stories from her community.**



Marley Kozak during her presentation.

Select excerpt from presentation:

Quotes by Marley Kozak:

"…we also received an EJ for Climate grant, and through that funding, we implemented the 'Seeding the Future: Adaptation to Climate Impacts Through Healthy Ecosystems and Traditional Plants' project in the Piikani First Nation…Piikani is a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy, located in southern Alberta. They're in a unique environment of prairie grasslands and montane forests, nestled at the base of the foothills of the Canadian Rocky Mountains."

"Piikani suffers from the risks of droughts, floods, wildfires, loss of biodiversity, and food insecurity. To make matters worse, these challenges have additional stressors from things like changes in water flows due to dams, overgrazing of their traditional lands, and Western farming practices."

"Sweetgrass is a culturally significant plant to the Piikani people, but also to many Indigenous Peoples worldwide. Sweetgrass is grown in wetlands, marshes, and meadows. Unfortunately, these ecosystems are declining due to human impact and the climate crisis."

"We're also working with the youth of the Nation on several climate initiatives. One of them is a Stories of Resilience program, which gives students the opportunity to learn about climate change and share their stories about local climate impacts, resilience, and climate justice. The other program we're working on is building food security through a hydroponic farm to help combat food insecurity. We're also working with students to develop and implement a composting program."

"One big issue we see is that local, and Indigenous communities are often excluded from policy and decision-making, and the policy and decision-making is on topics that impact the community's economic, environmental, and political self-determination."

"We're finding that climate change adaptation plans are not community specific. National and global plans are often not relevant to the pressing needs of the communities we're working with. They're often lengthy to implement and very expensive. Another big obstacle is the delay between planning and action."



Violaine Pronovost and EJ4Climate grantees.

Presentation by Jaziel Soto Torres, Cucapá El Mayor Indigenous Community

Summary: **Jaziel Soto Torres is a member of the Cucapá indigenous group in Baja California, Mexico. Jaziel was a participant in the CEC's Communities for Environmental Justice Network trinational workshop held in Mexico in 2023. Jaziel shared experiences from his community.**

Summary of excerpts from the presentation:

- Jaziel Soto Torres shared: We, the Cucapá El Mayor Indigenous Community, are located in the state of Baja California, and our territory extends to reservations in the state of Sonora. We are acknowledged as a national ethnic group and are part of the ethnolinguistic and human group, which encompasses different indigenous communities. We are very closely related to the Colorado River. As you can see, many of our indigenous communities in this ethnolinguistic group are located along the edges of the Colorado River. We have very tight-knit communities, and even those that are not settled along the river acknowledge their connection to the Colorado River through the transmission of stories and traditional knowledge.
- Jaziel Soto Torres explained: Our main issue right now is water. Dams have stopped the natural flow of the Colorado River through binational agreements. But before that, I would like to specify that one of our main issues and obstacles comes from the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), which manages the natural stem and flow of the Colorado River. They are withholding water through the use of dams, and one of our main problems is that we are not included in the agreements between Mexico, the United States, and the IBWC.
- Jaziel Soto Torres shared: We know the delta of the Colorado River is where the river meets the sea, and now there is no longer a connection between the river and the sea, due to the withholding of water for a long period of time. We can see environmental degradation here. There used to be a very particular type of grassland in this ecosystem. The environmental degradation is clear. In our territory, we also have a lagoon that is now completely desertified.
- Jaziel Soto Torres explained: When the Colorado River's ice was melting, we would receive large volumes of water that way. Now, that water is being withheld in the dams, and the water we receive today comes from a wastewater treatment plant from the city of Mexicali. We also get water from agricultural activities, but it's no longer 100% natural water from the river. This is impacting our main livelihood activity, which is fishing. We also used to be hunters and gatherers, but these activities have been severely impacted and are no longer carried out due to the environmental degradation. This also brings issues in preserving our culture.
- Jaziel Soto Torres shared: The picture on the left is of my grandmother, holding a skirt, which is part of our traditional costume and knowledge. This skirt comes from the willow tree, which is sacred for us. It provides materials for tools, traditional medicine, and many other uses. However, the willow tree requires high humidity and moisture, and since I was nine years old, I've not seen any willow bark around. I don't see willow trees close to our community anymore. They are far away, in areas managed by civil associations for conservation.
- Jaziel Soto Torres shared: I want to bring to your attention the massive social inequality in our community. There is a lack of interest from both the Mexican and US governments, as they are not involving us in binational agreements. This has caused huge problems in our social fabric, making survival difficult. We are experiencing very high temperatures. Yesterday, the news mentioned that Mexicali is one of the hottest cities. There is also abandonment from institutions, which has prevented us from developing resilience projects for climate change.



Panel discussion on the CEC's EJ4Climate Grant Program and Communities for Environmental Justice Network.

Generation of Environmental Leaders Program Youth Teams (GELP)

Summary: **The GELP is the CEC's latest youth engagement initiative, supporting young leaders across North America with hands-on opportunities, skills training, and connections to experts and decision-makers to advance local solutions to environmental and climate challenges. The first GELP cohort presented their projects and work. The first GELP cohort includes:**

- McKenna Dunbar and Jake Barnett of Electrivive
- Ana Cristina Posadas García and Daniela Guadalupe De Regil Muñoz of *Organización para Restaurar el Medio Ambiente y la Armonía Social—ORMA* (Organization to Restore the Environment and Social Harmony)
- Alexandre Savard and Nicolas Jourdan-Gassin of *Encore! Biomatériaux* (Encore! Biomaterials).

Opening remarks were made by CEC Executive Director Jorge Daniel Taillant and Emiliano Reyes, Technical Advisor on Climate Change at the German Development Cooperation (GIZ).



Jacob Barnet and McKenna Dunbar, Founding team, Electrivive.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- McKenna Dunbar and Jake Barnett presented on their project, Electrivive, an equitable building decarbonization workforce development tool. It addresses two main systemic problems—recidivism, or the understanding that formerly incarcerated members of society tend to rejoin the prison system due to the lack of systemic societal support; and climate change and its related problems such as energy burden and environmental racism. Electrivive is a substantive workforce development tool that seeks to educate its audience on holistic energy issues, as well as giving them an understanding of building decarbonization and energy efficiency in a place where choices are limited.



Ana Cristina Posadas Co-founder of Organización para Restaurar el Medio Ambiente y la Armonía Social (ORMA) (Organization to Restore the Environment and Social Harmony).

- Ana Cristina Posadas García presented the Organization to Restore the Environment and Social Harmony, a strategy for the restoration and conservation of the Ciénega of Tamasopo wetland. Working with the local community, the project pairs environmental education and nature-based solutions proposed by the community to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable agricultural practices, as well as eliminate the burning of sugarcane waste, which causes contamination and destructive fires.



Alexandre Savard, Co-founder of *Encore! Biomatériaux* (Encore! Biomaterials)

- Alexandre Savard presented on *Encore! Biomatériaux* (Encore! Biomaterials), a solution for reducing both plastic pollution and pollution from organic waste by developing sustainable materials from today's organic waste. *Encore! Biomatériaux* has created a compostable procedure using the brewing industry's waste and has received expressions of interest from different industries.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools referenced:

- 2024 GELP Cohort (link)

Dialogue with the Council on Environmental Justice

Summary: During this session, Council members and invited experts participated in a public dialogue on Environmental Justice. Invited experts included:

- Emiliano Reyes, Technical Advisor on Climate Change at the German Development Cooperation (GIZ)
- Faith Magdalena de León, Senior researcher and a paralegal with the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA)
- William J. Barber III, Senior Director of Impact and Equitable Investments at the Coalition for Green Capital.

The dialogue was moderated by CEC Executive Director Jorge Daniel Taillant. The three Council members included US EPA Deputy Administrator Janet McCabe, Canada ECCC Assistant Deputy Minister Sandra McCardell, and Mexico Semarnat Undersecretary Iván Rico López. Remarks were also given by 2024 JPAC Chair Esteban Escamilla Prado and Professor La'Meshia Whittington.

Select excerpts from presentation:

"Administrator Regan's Journey to Justice provides an opportunity to meet face-to-face with the people in those communities, and he has done so. He sits on their front porches and in their schools and in their churches to hear and see firsthand the challenges that they endure, and in so many cases, hear about how many years they have been knocking on the doors of government without getting a response—sometimes so long that they're not doing it anymore."
— Janet McCabe

"One last example is the creation in 2022 of a new office within the EPA, the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights, which focuses on our organizational structure—200 staff people who are working focused on environmental justice and external civil rights as a way of bringing those concerns to the table in an equal posture with our Office of Air, our Office of Water, and our other major offices…This new office has been the driving force behind our agency-wide commitment to meet and exceed President Biden's challenge to federal agencies to deliver at least 40% of federal investments to disadvantaged communities. This is an extraordinary commitment and direction by the President to our agencies, one that we've never seen before, and that we are being held accountable to. So, everything we're doing at EPA is rooted in the belief that everyone, no matter the color of their skin, the money in their pocket, or their zip code, deserves to live in and realize the full protections of our environmental laws."
— Janet McCabe

"Decades of grassroots advocacy work resulted in a new law to pursue environmental justice. That legislation is called 'the Act respecting the development of a national strategy to assess, prevent, and address environmental racism and to advance environmental justice'…

There were a lot of people who worked a long time to have the concerns of communities and grassroots organizations rise up to the level of Parliament and to see that kind of substantive and meaningful step taken. This new legislation acknowledges the ongoing environmental inequalities across Canada and that Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized people are more likely to live in environmentally hazardous areas.

This legislation emphasizes the need to advance environmental justice across Canada. It highlights that the federal government must focus its work to address the profound, ongoing systemic inequities—not just in the environmental burdens, but in the very foundation of our society, including in our core institutions."
— Sandra McCardell

"Environmental justice is reflected in our legal and constitutional framework. In our constitution, we recognize the right to a healthy environment, and we have also participated in international agreements that have allowed us to advance in this area. One well-known example is the Escazú Agreement, and we have been working on a protocol for the protection of people who defend the environment, as well as access to information and environmental justice."
— Iván Rico López, (quote obtained by simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English)

"The Justice Plans—the 11 Justice Plans with Indigenous communities—are part of our development programs. These 11 Justice Plans reflect Mexico's commitment to environmental justice. Our work extends beyond just environmental issues; we also focus on social, territorial, and educational aspects, aiming to reinstate the historical value of these communities. One example is the Yaquí community, but it is not the only one."
— Iván Rico López
(quote obtained by simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English)

"In Mexico, we are working with a new vision—one that brings us closer to communities and places life at the center. The environment is directly related to life. Water, flora, and fauna are directly tied to our well-being, and this is how we approach socio-environmental issues in our country." - Iván Rico López (quote obtained by simultaneous interpretation from Spanish to English)

"A few things to mention: EJ is complex. It has many definitions, and it has very different historical, political, and social contexts depending on where it manifests. There are very different manifestations of EJ, and different things are called EJ. But there are also many commonalities, and that's important. That's what holds this discussion together—what makes this issue a focal point. Because otherwise, everything would be EJ—all environmental problems would be EJ. And they're not."
— Jorge Daniel Taillant

"Indigenous environmental justice—different [from environmental justice], but integral. It's important. It's defined by colonization, by the struggles of Indigenous peoples and communities. It will follow unique pathways in the EJ discussion. This was part of our conversation. I clearly registered Ariel's message: 'We don't want to simply tweak colonial structures. We need to deconstruct systemic inequities, historical inequities, and rebuild them'."
— Jorge Daniel Taillant



William J. Barber III during the Dialogue with the Council on Environmental Justice.

Summary of excerpts from the presentation:

- Professor Whittington shared: The key word is enforcement. We must not just have policies enshrined but also have enforcement of these policies. Without enforcement, policies are simply symbolism.
- William J. Barber III explained: We know that the climate transition—and equity in the distribution of its benefits—is an essential mission that calls for specialized knowledge, proven approaches, and rigorous assessment and reflection. We need a combination of approaches: (1) Community engagement, (2) Green financing, (3) Pre-development, where we design and develop projects that create real benefits on the ground, and (4) Community outreach and education to drive demand and adoption of these technologies.



Faith Magdalena de León, also known as Fe de León, during the Dialogue with the Council on Environmental Justice.

- Faith Magdalena de León shared: We haven't always used the term environmental justice, but we have always dealt with inequities. One clear example that demonstrates the need for reviewing laws and policies to protect people's health is our involvement in the Walkerton Inquiry. For those who don't know, in 2000, a tragic event occurred in a small community in central Ontario when their local well system became contaminated. Over the May long weekend, *E. coli* contamination resulted in seven deaths. No one had heard of Walkerton before, but the event became symbolic of the consequences of deregulation, particularly regarding the protection of drinking water sources in Ontario. Our organization responded by reaching out to the affected community and recognizing the need for legal representation during the inquiry. The contamination had originated from nearby farmland, where manure runoff entered the water supply. Addressing this required systemic changes and new legal protections to prevent similar tragedies in the future.
- Faith Magdalena de León explained: The Walkerton Inquiry highlighted the inequities certain communities face—often unknowingly—when they lack the resources or legal knowledge to engage in these processes. Our role was to create space for these voices to be heard and to advocate for solutions that would protect communities moving forward. The recent passage of new environmental justice legislation in Canada provides an important opportunity to strengthen this work. Moving forward, a key question is: Who do we bring to the table for these discussions, and how do we create space for them to participate? Ensuring meaningful engagement will be critical to making progress.

Key highlights & takeaways:

Calls to action that arose during the public forum include:

1. Integrate the voices of the most affected communities by promoting education, awareness, and access to environmental justice. This includes ensuring communities have the tools and funding needed to develop their own solutions.
2. Create new guidelines to address racism against Indigenous Peoples and people with intersectional identities, including implementing policies that strengthen community-centered solutions and enforcing laws that combat environmental injustice.
3. Adopt an intersectional approach in data collection to map and identify needs and opportunities, develop tailored solutions, and introduce new narratives that foster inclusive language around environmental justice.
4. Protecting environmental advocates by strengthening legal frameworks and increasing awareness.
5. Integrating environmental justice into public policies to safeguard historically marginalized communities through stronger environmental laws and health protections.
6. Engage historically marginalized communities in decision-making, ensuring they participate in the creation and implementation of solutions.
7. Recognizing systemic discrimination, such as racism and colonialism, and its impact on communities.
8. Addressing the overexploitation of natural resources and the persistence of extractivism, including energy extraction, which causes social and environmental damage, such as landscape destruction, water contamination, greenhouse gas emissions, and the displacement of Indigenous communities.

9. Implementing strategic approaches at regional and national levels to counteract the impacts of discrimination, particularly in rural communities.
10. Centering proposals from Indigenous Peoples to develop community-led solutions.
11. Supporting environmental justice education, particularly for youth, by increasing funding for both formal and informal education systems to strengthen resilience and amplify advocacy efforts.
12. Building networks and partnerships to empower communities, mobilize them for their rights, and foster hope.
13. Developing new economic strategies that prioritize biodiversity and promote responsible and sustainable private-sector practices.



Emiliano Reyes during the GELP session.

Three key concepts were introduced to inspire the work of the CEC and regional cooperation so that it becomes a true catalyst for environmental justice. These concepts were presented by Emiliano Reyes, and were as follows:

Concept 1. Intersectionality.

We must recognize that systems of oppression create different conditions of marginalization for communities based on their identities—whether it be Indigenous identity, gender, age, ability, migration status, or other factors. We need to design policies that account for these vulnerabilities and sensitivities so that we can address them holistically and ensure justice for historically marginalized groups.

Concept 2. A Fair Transition.

We must acknowledge that transitioning our socio-economic systems toward climate neutrality requires distributing the benefits equitably. People and nature must be at the center of this process. Two specific ideas are important for this discussion. The first is the concept of Rights of Nature, a legal tool that can help safeguard biodiversity and Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge. Indigenous communities have long been the guardians of the Earth, and their knowledge must be central to environmental governance. The second idea is the decentralization of energy systems. While we have a mandate to decarbonize, we must not approach it in a top-down manner. Instead, communities must be empowered to manage the transition, ensuring that renewable energy is accessible and controlled at the local level.

Concept 3. Intergenerational Equity.

The latest climate reports show that the actions—or inaction—of this generation will shape the future for everyone. We are already experiencing the consequences of climate change, and it is essential that we equip young people with the tools to imagine and implement alternative futures. Youth make up one-quarter of North America's population. We must be included in technical and political decision-making spaces—not just within institutions, but also within local communities and grassroots movements.

CEC's 30 Year Anniversary Celebration

Summary: Celebrating 30 years of CEC work, Caitlyn McCoy, Legal Officer at the CEC, highlighted the CEC's legacy of cross-border environmental cooperation through impactful, collaborative projects in species conservation, chemicals management, and food loss reduction, emphasizing how shared stewardship can drive meaningful regional change. Following that, Arturo Gavilán outlined Mexico's regulatory improvements and the CEC's collaborative initiatives addressing hazardous waste, mercury, and food waste, showcasing the power of tri-national coordination in tackling North America's major environmental challenges.



Caitlin McCoy during her presentation.

Key highlights & takeaways:

- Since 1994, the CEC has united Canada, Mexico, and the United States in protecting the environment through shared knowledge, best practices, and collective action. This includes protecting cross-border species and regulating chemicals, as well as promoting community science and public engagement.

Examples given:

- The monarch butterfly's multi-generational migration reflects the need for continent-wide collaboration, with the CEC leading efforts in research, public engagement, and policy coordination to protect its habitat.
- The CEC's collaborative action has led to major chemical safety reforms across North America, including eliminating DDT and improving the handling of hazardous waste like spent lead-acid batteries.
- Community science and public engagement are central to CEC initiatives, with programs like the Mayors' Monarch Pledge and the Monarch Monitoring Blitz empowering everyday people and local governments to take part in environmental stewardship.
- Following reports of US lead-acid batteries being exported to Mexico to sidestep regulations, Mexico's environment agency conducted an independent study and updated emissions standards in 2014 based on findings of weak oversight and unreliable trade data.
- In 2015, the CEC released best practices for secondary lead smelters, reinforcing environmental safeguards across North America.
- Collaborative mercury reduction has been a long-term success. Since 2000, the CEC has worked with all three countries to curb mercury emissions from human activities, exemplifying the impact of sustained regional cooperation.
- Acknowledging that food waste contributes significantly to methane emissions, the CEC launched a multi-stage strategy focused on knowledge generation, measurement tools, and education to reduce loss across the supply chain, as a high-impact climate action.

Key policies, reports, and/or tools:

- Profepa Independent Study and Updated Emission Standards (2014)
- 2015 CEC Best Practices for Secondary Lead Smelters
- CEC food waste project
- Mayors' Monarch Pledge
- Monarch Monitoring Blitz

2024 CEC Council Statement: Strengthening Environmental Justice and Empowering Communities

Day 3

Wilmington, North Carolina, 26 June 2024 –
For the past 30 years, the governments of Canada, Mexico and the United States have worked together through the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) to advance solutions for the most crucial environmental challenges facing North America. We met today for the annual Regular Session in Wilmington, North Carolina, under the theme: "Strengthening Environmental Justice through Community Empowerment," marking the CEC's 30th year of facilitating trilateral environmental cooperation.



The three Council members, from Left to Right, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) Assistant Deputy Minister Sandra McCardell, US EPA Deputy Administrator Janet McCabe, Mexico Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Semarnat) (Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources) Undersecretary Iván Rico López.

In this key location in the history of the North American environmental justice movement, we take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to strengthening environmental justice through community empowerment and prioritizing our efforts to address the concerns of historically marginalized and underserved communities across North America.

This year's Council Session centered on opportunities for advancing environmental justice actions in North America that will help empower communities. Some of these opportunities include actions to improve air quality in disadvantaged neighborhoods, fostering interactions between community leaders and public officials on environmental justice issues, and meaningful engagement with key groups, including youth leaders.

Three Decades of Regional Environmental Cooperation

The CEC has been the cornerstone of trilateral cooperation on environmental issues in North America for the past 30 years. This strong partnership has enabled us to work on protecting, restoring and conserving our precious North American environment. We will continue our joint trilateral work through the CEC in order to address present and future environmental challenges, including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Throughout the Council Session, we were able to highlight several successful and reproducible projects that have been implemented by the CEC over the past 30 years. These projects serve as examples of the innovative and impactful work that the CEC has undertaken; for example, our work on monarch conservation, efforts to tackle food loss and food waste, and ways to phase out and manage harmful chemicals such as dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT) and lead acid in batteries in North America.



Council meeting.

Celebrating 30 years of dedicated work is a remarkable milestone. As we reflect on the CEC's significant achievements, unwavering commitment and impactful contributions, we confirm the commitment done during our first Council Session, in 1995:

"The environment knows no borders. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the animals which move freely, all bind us together. But with these shared resources comes a collective responsibility. Only by working together will we solve North America's most pressing environmental problems in an efficient and cost-effective manner. In this way, we can make the North American region an environmental example for the rest of the world."
— CEC Ministerial Statement, Oaxaca, Mexico, 13 October 1995

Strengthening Environmental Justice through Community Empowerment

Improving environmental governance is vital to the work of the CEC and to the CEC's mission, as well as to the commitments of our North American leaders. We must continue to advance non-discrimination, increase diversity and foster social equity and inclusion, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), 2SLGBTQIA+ and other communities, women, children, youth, migrants, and other historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

Through the work of the CEC, we are expanding our common understanding of the concepts of environmental justice and the intersection between environmental burdens and social vulnerabilities of impacted North American groups and communities, while leveraging the experiences of community leaders, academia, civil society organizations and businesses.

We were pleased to support four open public forums, including the Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) Public Forum on 24 June, which focused on advancing environmental justice in North America; a Youth Panel on 25 June, offering youth leaders the opportunity for direct engagement on their leading role in the fight for environmental justice; the CEC Executive Director's panel on 25 June, on environmental justice, its origins, evolution and emerging policy in North America; and the 26 June Council Public Meeting on ways to strengthen approaches to achieving environmental justice through community empowerment. These events provided invaluable opportunities for participants to share knowledge and exchange information and views among themselves and with the Council members and offered the general public a space for questions, comments and suggestions on the CEC's cooperative work.

These events included both in-person and virtual attendance, with broad representation of diverse groups of interested individuals and actors from across North America. Through the discussion of many and diverse examples of environmental justice actions that have taken place in each of our countries, we had the opportunity to increase environmental justice knowledge and best practices to promote access to information, meaningful participation and engagement, as well as access to justice, which are all key pillars of the environmental justice movement.

Our exchanges and interactions during the Council Session with both the CEC Joint Public Advisory Committee and with the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Expert Group were fruitful and inspirational. We exchanged ideas on how to work collaboratively to tackle the triple planetary crisis, while also building a just, equitable and sustainable future for everyone, particularly in the region's most historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities.



JPAC member Octaviana V. Trujillo listening to discussions during the Council meeting.



Marcela Orozco, CEC Head of Unit, Advisory Groups and Private Sector Engagement, listening to discussions during the Council meeting.

Announcements and New Initiatives

As part of the Council Session, we:

- Committed US$1.5 million for the fourth cycle of the CEC's Environmental Justice and Climate Resilience grant program (EJ4Climate), which provides funding directly to community-based organizations and seeks to support environmental justice by enabling communities to advance solutions and partnerships to address their environmental and human health vulnerabilities, particularly those due to climate impacts. The theme for the fourth cycle is Community-led education programs to increase environmental justice and climate adaptation knowledge.
- Contributed C$500,000 to launch a new North American Environmental Justice Action Center (NAEJAC), a resource platform that will bring together community representatives, advocates and public officials from across our three countries to share and leverage best practices and tools for environmental justice.

This platform also aims to identify opportunities to promote equitable and inclusive environmental justice actions across North America that will help our countries exchange knowledge and best practices with the goal of addressing inequities in historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities and sectors.

We launched the following new initiatives:

- Support for monarch butterfly science
- Data exchange system for hazardous waste transfers
- Using large-scale public events to catalyze collective shifts toward food waste reduction
- Sharing best practices for environmentally sound management of used lead acid
- First Generation of Environmental Leaders Program cohort

"The United States is proud to host the 31st CEC Council Session and to reaffirm our commitment to advancing environmental justice and community empowerment through our collaborative work with the CEC. Strengthening environmental governance, and ensuring equitable access to clean air, water and land for all, especially historically underserved communities, is central to our mission. This year's focus on empowering communities and fostering meaningful engagement is crucial for building a just, inclusive and sustainable future. We will continue to work closely with our partners in Canada and Mexico, as well as with local communities, youth leaders and Indigenous groups, to tackle our most urgent environmental challenges, protect public health and promote environmental justice across North America."
— Janet McCabe, United States Environmental Protection Agency Deputy Administrator.

"As we tackle the challenges of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, the cooperation between our three countries, through the CEC, is more important than ever. We have delivered important contributions to the environment, including food loss and waste initiatives, the Generation of Environmental Leaders program and cross-cutting environmental justice work. The CEC remains a crucial partner in delivering these initiatives that address our shared regional challenges."
— Sandra McCardell, Assistant Deputy Minister, International Affairs, Environment and Climate Change Canada

"The government of Mexico acknowledges the right of communities to a healthy environment, and therefore puts a priority on guaranteeing equitable and sustainable access to the benefits flowing from the use of natural resources, while also promoting and strengthening the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities in environmental decision-making, with respect for their knowledge and ways of life, in accordance with the initiatives, programs, and projects implemented by the CEC in the North American region."
— Iván Rico López, Undersecretary for Environmental and Natural Resources of the Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico (Semarnat)

Moving Forward

We are proud of the work that we have accomplished over 30 years and at this Council Session to further advance our efforts on environmental justice across North America. Achieving environmental justice depends on our commitment to meaningfully tackle inequity, foster inclusion, and make non-discrimination a central pillar of our environmental action. Through our cooperative trilateral agenda, we will continue to engage our historically marginalized and underserved communities, which are often among the most climate-vulnerable communities, to promote inclusion, diversity, equity and non-discrimination in our environmental work in North America.

As a first step, the CEC will develop guidance and tools on environmental justice that will include best practices with respect to effective laws, policies and programs that can help foster better access to relevant information, examples on how to improve access to justice and compliance with environmental laws and also promote more meaningful engagement and participation by key groups. In order to promote Indigenous engagement and partnerships, the CEC will continue working with the TEK expert group to develop North American Principles for the incorporation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in the CEC's work and policies for meaningful engagement and working with Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

In line with key international efforts, we will coordinate our cooperative work to improve the wellbeing of North Americans by advancing actions that address all aspects of the triple crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. This entails aligning our climate policies and strategies with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and implementing these policies and strategies, supporting biodiversity conservation to achieve the goals and targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and addressing pollution in support of a future global agreement on plastics pollution. We will also prioritize issues with severe and inequitable impacts on human health, livelihoods and economic productivity.



Council holding their signed Ministerial Statement.

We strongly support and will continue to support the CEC Submission on Enforcement Matters (SEM) process, as demonstrated this past year by signing a Council Resolution for the Hydraulic Fracturing SEM submission.

We reaffirm our commitment to cooperation that will advance the protection of our shared North American environment and to enhance our engagement with the public, youth, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, academia and the private sector.

We look forward to our continued trilateral work with the Secretariat, JPAC, TEKEG and youth to advance the protection of our shared North American environment, and to meeting together at the CEC's 2025 Council Session in Mexico.



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