

2024 CEC Council Statement: Strengthening Environmental Justice and Empowering Communities

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

APPROVED BY THE COUNCIL:

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