

Opening Statement of John Shimkus
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
“Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy:
The Challenges Facing Frontline Communities”
November 20, 2019

As Prepared for Delivery

The focus of today’s hearing, as the Majority explains in the hearing memo, is “to examine environmental justice and the impact of climate change and extreme events on legacy toxic exposures.”

And there is also a lot packed into subject and into the topic of environmental justice generally.

Environmental Justice is often associated, as we all know, with complex circumstances involving local social, economic, and governmental factors. These factors, and their real impacts on people—which many of us witness in our own districts—present practical challenges that go well beyond the jurisdiction of this panel, and in many cases the federal government.

However, our policy work on air quality and safe drinking water, various forms of environmental cleanup and community revitalization, or on what is necessary to more fully address future hazards and climate risk should aim to prioritize the most pressing problems, as well as aim to have a positive impact on all communities, regardless of race, income, or location.

Today’s hearing will help answer questions about the specific roles of the EPA and how its various missions and programs ensure implementation of the

principles of environmental justice—defined by the Agency as, the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people and communities with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

The first panel today features the broad perspective of the Government Accountability Office on the state of federal policies, and the testimony from two key officials at the EPA responsible for implementing EJ policies and programs and ensuring compliance with civil rights laws.

As the GAO observes, EPA along with other federal agencies have been working to identify and address environmental justice issues for more than 25 years. EPA, for its part, has served at the center of this effort, convening the federal interagency working group and developing a number of initiatives in the agency to promote environmental justice in communities and measuring progress on this front.

A core feature of environmental justice programs should be to ensure communities have the information and know how to participate in governmental activities. So it will be helpful to hear more about how EPA encourages collaboration from the federal to the state and tribal level to the community level on environmental issues.

We should examine how EPA’s “EJ” office provides community assistance, through [grants and other resources](#) and the impacts of that assistance. And we should understand how office promotes its policies through EPA’s other program offices and regulations, such as through the Safe Drinking Water Act and its

related funding programs, which have [benefited from improvements](#) we enacted into law last Congress.

EPA has the expertise to identify risks and to inform and put risks in perspective for communities. I'd like to understand the role of EPA's "EJ" screening tool, and the uses and limits of this program for environmental justice initiatives.

EPA's [land revitalization](#) programs serve an important mission to improve environmental quality and the economic prospects for communities. Last year, this Committee strengthened and reauthorized the [Brownfields Program](#) and I'd like to hear EPA's progress on this front and what other community revitalization initiatives it is exploring.

As we look at "EJ" issues and climate risks, we should not lose sight of the role that robust local economic development can provide, especially for those who have seen industries and employment opportunities leave their communities.

We will hear important perspectives our second panel today. I would like to highlight two witnesses who can help widen our focus on the benefits of economic revitalization and development and the challenges facing local and country governments.

Mr. Pat Ford will speak to the challenges faced by small local economic development agencies and how EPA's Brownfields Programs provide much needed economic leverage for community economic development—and what that means for economically disadvantaged communities in particular.

Ms. Melissa Cribbins, a member of the Coos County, Oregon Board of Commissioners and speaking on behalf of the National Association of Counties, will outline challenges counties face addressing environmental issues, providing opportunities for economic development, and ensuring the resources to provide the infrastructure and services necessary for communities' health and welfare.

Thank you all, and I look forward to an informative, constructive hearing.