



U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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441 G St. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20548

January 29, 2020

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear Chairman Pallone:

Please find GAO's responses to questions for the record for the hearing entitled "Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy: The Challenges Facing Frontline Communities" held on Nov. 20, 2019. If you have any questions, you can reach me at [gomezj@gao.gov](mailto:gomezj@gao.gov) or at (202) 512-3841.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alfredo Gómez". The signature is written in a cursive style.

J. Alfredo Gómez  
Director  
Natural Resources and Environment Team

Enclosure

**Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change**  
**Hearing on**  
**“Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy: The Challenges Facing Frontline Communities”**  
**November 20, 2019**

**Mr. J. Alfredo Gómez**  
**Director, Natural Resources and Environment**  
**U.S. Government Accountability Office**

**The Honorable John Shimkus (R-IL)**

1. **Your report discusses the importance of updated strategic plans, annual progress reports, and performance measures. What has EPA done in these areas?**

RESPONSE: EPA developed an environmental justice strategic plan after signing the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding, released an updated plan in 2016, and issued seven out of eight annual environmental justice progress reports 2012 through 2019. EPA's updated environmental justice strategic plan included strategic goals and an assessment of how its environmental justice efforts aligned with its overall mission.

EPA was one of four agencies (out of 16 agencies that GAO reviewed) that established performance measures or milestones for their environmental justice efforts, and one of two that reported on progress toward achieving these measures or milestones. For example, in its environmental justice strategic plan for 2016 through 2020, EPA established four goals for reducing environmental and health hazards: reducing children's exposure to lead, reducing contamination of small and tribal drinking water systems, reducing fine particle air pollution, and reducing contamination at hazardous waste sites. EPA established performance measures for tracking progress toward each of these goals at the national level.

2. **How has EPA's grant program supported environmental justice communities?**

RESPONSE: For fiscal years 2015 through 2018, EPA awarded an average of about \$1.2 million annually in environmental justice grants to communities through the Environmental Justice Small Grants Program and Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement Program. These two grant programs provide communities with funding to research and understand potential environmental and health issues in their communities. Specifically, EPA provides Environmental Justice Small Grants for up to \$30,000 to support projects that help communities build understanding of local environmental and public health issues, develop strategies for addressing these issues, and facilitate discussions about community priorities. For example, in 2017, the Trumbull Neighborhood Partnership in Warren, Ohio, received an EPA Environmental Justice Small Grant for an educational initiative to reduce residents' exposure to soil contamination from former industrial activities, such as steel production.

3. **Economic development is important for rural and disadvantaged communities. Did GAO find examples of federal environmental justice efforts that provided economic benefits as well as environmental benefits?**

RESPONSE: GAO found some examples of federal environmental justice efforts that provided economic benefits for rural and disadvantaged communities. For example, in

2017, DOI and EPA entered into an MOU to collaborate on environmental justice and economic development issues by assisting underserved communities through academic partnerships, technical assistance, and training, in collaboration with the communities. EPA has also reported that an initial \$20,000 grant to a community organization in Spartanburg, South Carolina in 2000 paid for research to help confirm health issues related to nearby hazardous waste sites, and that this initial investment helped Spartanburg secure investments in the community including a community health center, affordable housing, and a recreation center.

Another example of federal environmental justice efforts is that in 2017, a largely rural and minority population in Lowndes County, Alabama faced problems with its wastewater treatment, increasing its risk of parasites, such as hookworm, through untreated wastewater. The General Services Administration collaborated with the Rural Communities Committee of the Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice to help apply for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) rural development grant funding for decentralized sewer systems in Lowndes by using federal surplus personal property as matching funds.

4. **You mentioned in your report that the Intergovernmental Working Group has developed environmental justice guidance for environmental reviews and EPA has developed a mapping tool called EJSCREEN. With these, do federal agencies have enough to carry out environmental justice efforts?**

RESPONSE: The environmental review guidance and EJSCREEN tool provide tools for agencies to incorporate environmental justice decisions into their work. Stakeholders we interviewed said that EJSCREEN is a useful tool for agencies and the public to screen for communities with potential environmental justice issues. Stakeholders also said agencies could use EJSCREEN in additional ways (e.g., in rulemaking and permitting) and discussed some limitations for its use (e.g., data limitations and the need to directly engage communities).

As our report stated, agencies need to have strategic plans in place to help them determine what goals, and how they will pursue them, in the area of environmental justice. For example, EPA's strategic plan EJ 2020 has a goal of incorporating environmental justice into permit and rulemaking processes; it is still in the process of implementing this goal. In addition, our report described other aspects of agencies' environmental justice efforts, including enforcing the Civil Rights Act, seeking public participation, providing guidance for incorporating environmental justice under the National Environmental Policy Act, and building communities' capacity. And as our report stated, most of the agencies rely on staffing resources that are not specifically dedicated to environmental justice. For example, officials from seven agencies we reviewed did not quantify estimates of resources but told us that staff conduct these activities as collateral duties.

5. **Your report mentions that many Federal agencies have not done annual progress reports and have said that they are burdensome. What do strategic planning practices say about how often these should be done?**

RESPONSE: Strategic performance practices that GAO has reviewed over the years highlight the benefit of issuing progress reports annually because they provide feedback to managers, policymakers, and the public as to what was accomplished and how goals

were met. One of the practices is to communicate performance information frequently and effectively. We previously reported that frequent, regular communication is key for managers to inform staff and other stakeholders of their commitment to achieve the agency's goals and to keep these goals in mind as they pursue their day-to-day activities. At a minimum, there should be an annual compilation and reporting of results, particularly to show what was achieved with the funds provided.

**6. In your testimony you mentioned the Rural Communities Committee of the Interagency Working Group. How does that group help rural communities?**

RESPONSE: The Rural Communities Committee has helped the USDA compile and launch a web page with links to tools, funding opportunities, educational or training assistance, and case studies to support rural communities. For example, as discussed earlier, one of the cases that the Rural Communities Committee assisted with was helping Lowndes County, Alabama, apply for USDA grant funding for decentralized sewer systems. The group collaborated with General Services Administration and USDA officials to help the county identify needs and funding for the sewers.