

February 8, 2022

The Honorable Raul Grijalva
Chairman
Natural Resources Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member
Natural Resources Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Westerman:

Women's Voices for the Earth, an environmental health organization representing tens of thousands of people across the nation, strongly supports the Environmental Justice for All Act (HR 2021). For too long, people of color and low-income communities have suffered the disproportionate impacts of pollution.

It is well-established that women of color experience some diseases and conditions at significantly higher rates than white women. African-American women are 34% more likely to die of breast cancer than white women^[1], and lupus, an autoimmune disease, affects African-American women at three times the rate of white women. Lupus also disproportionately affects women of Latina, Asian and American Indian descent^[2]. African American women are more likely to have premature births and babies born with low birth weights^[3]. While there may be numerous factors associated with these increased risks, each of these risks has also been linked with exposure to toxic chemicals.

People of color, including African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, comprise a majority of the population in neighborhoods where commercial hazardous waste facilities are located. Forty-six percent of housing units for the poor – mostly people of color – sit within about a mile of factories that reported toxic emissions to the EPA^[4]. As a result, people of color suffer higher-than-average rates of asthma, lead poisoning, and exposure to contaminated water, pesticides, and mercury^[5]. These factors, when combined with exposure in the workplace, home, and diet, often lead to greater adverse health effects in women of color than in the rest of the population.

Indigenous people who rely on traditional diets of fish and marine mammals are also strongly affected by environmental contamination, particularly of water. One study found blood levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) at levels six to nine times higher in the Yupik people of Alaska than in the general population in the lower 48 states^[6].

We strongly support the Act's central elements, which are important steps toward remedying a long legacy of harm, and ensuring the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people - regardless of color, culture, national origin, or income - with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of health and environmental laws, regulations, and policies. These urgently needed policy improvements include:

- Requiring federal agencies to consider cumulative health impacts under the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act in making permitting decisions, and ensuring that permits are only issued when there is a reasonable certainty of no harm to human health;

- Providing \$75 million in annual grants for research and program development to reduce health disparities; and improve public health in environmental justice communities;
- Strengthening the Civil Rights Act to permit private citizens and organizations facing discrimination to seek legal remedies;
- Creating an energy transition economic development assistance fund – paid for through new fees on oil, gas and coal companies – to support communities and workers as they transition away from greenhouse gas-dependent economies;
- Strengthening the National Environmental Policy Act to ensure that communities have a meaningful opportunity to engage in NEPA processes that will impact them.

The Environmental Justice for All Act is a long overdue correction to our nation's failed chemical management policies, and the cumulative hazards and disproportionate harms that have resulted for communities of color, low-income communities, and Native/Indigenous communities. We urge the Committee, and any other committees with jurisdiction over this legislation, to begin to correct these injustices and address this legacy of harm, by promptly passing the bill out of Committee and sending it on to the full House of Representatives.

Women's Voices for the Earth strongly supports (HR 2021).

Sincerely,

Jamie McConnell
Deputy Director
Women's Voices for the Earth

[1] Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2010. Finding Solutions to Health Disparities: At A Glance 2010. Available: <http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/AAG/reach.htm>

[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities. 2008. Eliminate Disparities in Lupus (Online Factsheet). Available: <http://www.cdc.gov/omhd/amh/factsheets/lupus.htm>

[3] March of Dimes Fact Sheet: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Birth Outcomes. Available at: https://www.marchofdimes.org/March-of-Dimes-Racial-and-Ethnic-Disparities_feb-27-2015.pdf

[4] Bullard, R; Saha, R; Wright, B. 2007. Toxic Wastes and Race and Twenty 1987-2007: Grassroots Struggles to Dismantle Environmental Racism in the United States. Report for United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries. Available: <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/twart.pdf>

[5] Ibid.

[6] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.3402/ijch.v64i4.18010>