

## TLF Opening Statement – 5.13.21 SCIP EJ Hearing

- First, I would like to thank our witnesses for taking the time to join us this morning. I understand that we have a witness who is joining us in the early morning hours from Hawaii. That's true dedication to environmental justice work and we are grateful for your presence.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as being “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”
- While this statement is forward-looking for a federal agency, on the ground, the environmental justice movement seeks to address a long-standing statistical fact, which is that the communities who are impacted most by pollution are commonly communities of color and the economically disadvantaged.
- As environmental justice advocates have demonstrated, it's these low-income and communities of color that are routinely targeted to host facilities and projects that have significant environmental impacts. With a promise of economic growth, these communities are often forced into a false-choice between their and their neighbors' health for limited job opportunities.
- Communities, and especially communities of color, have been battling this injustice for decades and have led what is now known as the environmental justice movement.
- It is important, though, to consider how Indigenous communities factor into this movement. While we must support the many communities battling environmental injustice, let's be clear tribal nations are not simply “communities of color.”
- They are sovereign nations that maintain legal and political identities, rather than racial ones. The federal government's responsibility to tribal nations is not one of race, it's one of political and legal precedent.
- We must remember that these tribal nations once occupied what is now the lands of the U.S. We are holding this hearing on the ancestral homelands of Anacostans, and other neighboring tribes.
- As Congress considers how the federal trust responsibility is involved in ensuring environmental justice for tribal communities, we must acknowledge that this responsibility comes out of obligation, not choice or altruism.

- If the federal government is not supporting the health and wellbeing of tribal communities—including the protection of tribal lands and resources—then it is violating its trust responsibility.
- Sadly, we can clearly see examples of this failure across Indian Country. From the abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation to the orphaned oil and gas wells of the Osage Nation, evidence of the federal government’s exploitation of tribal lands and resources seems to be ongoing and never-ending.
- This history of environmental exploitation is not only unjust—it is a default of the federal government’s obligations to tribal nations.
- Further, it is important for us to recognize the unique ways that Indigenous communities have been engaging in environmental justice since time immemorial.
- Protecting and preserving one’s traditional lands and natural resources is an inherent aspect of Indigenous traditional teachings. To many tribal nations and citizens, there is a direct link between a healthy natural environment and a healthy community.
- The teaching and practice of traditional customs have proven that Indigenous ancestors of this country knew this land, and its relationship to health and well-being.
- Before there was contact and colonization there was a plethora of unwritten Indigenous knowledge. It’s these teachings that need to be part of the conversation when we begin to talk about healing our environment. Because of this, climate scientists and environmental activists have significant opportunities to learn from Indigenous Peoples and traditional knowledge.
- By centering mainstream environmental initiatives around the perspectives and teachings of Indigenous communities, we will be better equipped to address the impacts of climate change and environmental injustice.
- I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today—to learn about how their nations and communities are bridging Indigenous knowledge with environmental science to heal our earth so future generations can enjoy its beauty.
- Environmental justice is a key movement, but it is crucial that we understand how this conversation differs in Indigenous communities. I’m very thankful to have such incredible witnesses here today and I look forward to hearing more from each of you.