

Alaska Community Action on Toxics * Amigos Bravos * Azul * Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Environmental Health * Children's Environmental Health Network
Clean Water Action * Conservation Law Foundation * Conservation Voters New Mexico
Deep South Center for Environmental Justice * Earthjustice * Environmental Justice Clinic,
Vermont Law School * The Forbes Funds * Great Basin Resource Watch * Gasp * GreenRoots
Multi-Cultural Alliance for a Safe Environment * National Black Environmental Justice Network
Natural Resources Defense Council * New Mexico Environmental Law Center
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest * North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land
Loss Prevention Project * PODER * Rio Grande Indivisible * River Source
Save the South Fork Salmon * Sierra Club * The Sierra Fund * Toxic Free NC
Veterans for Peace Golden Rule Project * WE ACT for Environmental Justice
West End Revitalization Association * Western Watershed Project
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COVID-19 and Environmental Justice: A Call to Action

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We, the undersigned environmental justice groups, activists, partners and allies, call for an immediate and sustained response to inequities causing COVID-19 to infect and kill a disproportionate number of people subjected to systemic racism and the denial of self-determination throughout the United States. This country has deprived certain peoples and communities the right to determine their own futures for reasons often grounded in racism and xenophobia. This, in turn, has been used to justify the clustering of environmental and public health risks, creating what have become sacrifice zones, out of sight and out of mind for the wealthier, whiter, and privileged few.

We affirm that Black Lives Matter and condemn the epidemic of police killings of people of color. In affirming that Black Lives Matter, we also call for an end to disproportionately high rates of illness and death experienced by people of color due to environmental racism. The pandemic has painfully and fatally exacerbated long-standing injustice for Black, Brown, and immigrant communities, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, people who are incarcerated or detained, and low wage workers across many sectors. Each is confronting the cumulative impacts of public health and economic crises on top of environmental and climate risks and a perpetual state of sanctioned violence. We must expose and dismantle the structures that permit and perpetuate this nation's sacrifice zones, and pursue environmental and climate justice and self-determination for all peoples.

Sacrifice of environmental justice communities results when people and communities are deprived of the right to determine their own economic, political and cultural futures. Denial of self-determination has created the concentration of burdens in certain communities and benefits in others. Indigenous people, who are experiencing some of the highest rates of COVID-19

infection, have witnessed the environmental degradation of their homelands caused by development and extraction of resources. This degradation has resulted in the restructuring of their identity and relationships with sacred places, and the displacement of Indigenous people from stewardship, guardianship and protection of their homelands. Housing discrimination and segregation have plagued environmental justice communities for generations, leading to systemic disinvestment in health infrastructure and resources, chronic poverty, and environmental racism - including drastic disproportionality in exposure to air and water pollution - and inequalities in job opportunities. Incarceration, detention, and institutionalization by their nature deny self-determination to those confined.

Underserved and environmentally overburdened communities are now also experiencing disproportionate COVID-19 infections and deaths. Those sacrificed to COVID-19 include disproportionate numbers of [Indigenous peoples and communities of color](#), frontline and healthcare workers, workers in slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants, farmworkers, nursing home residents and employees, people with disabilities in institutional settings, and those who work or are incarcerated in prisons, jails, and detention centers.

From Detroit, where many residents have had their water cut off, to the Black Belt of Alabama, where communities are fighting for modern-day wastewater treatment, to tribal lands, which have been deprived of clean water by programs that have diverted water for commercial uses, communities across the country lack access to clean water, which is essential to hygiene practices necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19.

[Preliminary research](#) indicates that COVID-19 death rates are significantly higher in areas with even slightly elevated long-term levels of fine particulate matter air pollution. The sacrifice of communities to poverty or industrial pollution has been slow and insidious, but initial destruction and harm to communities by COVID-19 has been swift and on a massive scale, making it harder for those living outside of impacted communities to ignore.

The connection between prior injustices and the impacts of COVID-19 is not a coincidence. Disinvestment in environmental justice communities has contributed to polluted air and water, fewer hospitals and healthy food options, jobs without paid sick leave, and crowded living conditions that make social distancing difficult. These factors - the lack of access to clean air and water, healthcare or paid leave, or safe and healthy food, transportation, housing and workplaces, among others - cause the disproportionate impacts we witness.

We must use this moment to bring these inequities to an end. Deconstruction of historic and ongoing injustices of this magnitude requires a paradigm shift in how we approach land use, pollution, health, and housing. It will require not only the cessation of the disproportionate allocation of burdens that perpetuate inequities, but indeed also the reverse; it will require the intentional re-allocation of benefits to underserved communities, and the intentional distribution of burdens on a fairer basis to communities that currently shoulder fewer burdens.

We, the people of the United States, can only claim to have a national aspiration for equality under the law if we work to correct inequality when it is revealed. We stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and point to the [NAACP's Civil Rights Advocacy Recommendations](#), the [National Black Environmental Justice Network's Economic Justice and Frontline Workers Statement](#) and [The People's Bailout](#) as important sets of recommendations for responding to COVID-19.

It is time for fundamental change. We release this statement today to call for the following solutions, knowing that even these will only take us part of the way down the road:

- Equal protection: Robust civil rights enforcement to address inequalities in housing and environmental exposures, including affirmative housing mandates. We call for equal protection before the law, including access to the courts for communities fighting race discrimination in environmental decision-making, and specifically access to the courts to challenge actions with a racially disparate impact. Congressional passage of legislation such as the [Environmental Justice Act of 2019](#) or the [Environmental Justice For All Act](#) would be a significant first step.
- An end to discriminatory segregation now: At federal and state levels, in government and the private sector, we must chart a path toward inclusive living, educational, and work environments and to enact policies to promote affordable housing for all and inclusion of people with disabilities in our communities.
- Fulfillment of federal Treaty obligations to Native American nations, including the right to quality healthcare, housing and education.
- Access to infrastructure, and recognition that clean water is a basic right: A central plank of any movement forward must be an infrastructure program, including not only clean drinking water, but also wastewater treatment, sanitary waste disposal, public transportation, telecommunications and wifi/broadband.
- Protective environmental laws: We call for protective environmental rules and strong enforcement of environmental laws. EPA should be marshaling the best science from all academic disciplines and learning from communities that have knowledge from experience. We call on EPA to withdraw proposed rules that would weaken environmental protection, for all agencies to target enforcement activities in the most vulnerable and overburdened communities, for new laws requiring environmental decision-makers to evaluate the cumulative impacts of burdens borne in particular locations before licensing yet another polluting source in overburdened communities, and, more generally, for renewed commitment to strengthen environmental and health protections.
- Protection of workers: We can no longer balance our way of life -- including access to transportation, food, energy, and the many goods and services we have come to expect -- on the backs of workers while failing to provide a living wage and benefits. We must strengthen and enforce occupational health and safety laws, ensure access to health care, and protect workers -- particularly our many immigrant workers -- from harm. We join the many calling for worker justice at local, state, and federal levels, in the fields and in the cities, to be carried out by both the private and public sectors, including the [National Employment Law Project](#) and [United Food and Commercial Workers](#).
- Comprehensive reform of the criminal justice system, including decarceration, police accountability and reallocation of law enforcement budgets to re-invest in communities.
- Finally, quality health care for all: We must address health care inequities with comprehensive health coverage and health care reform to break barriers based on race, national origin, immigrant status, employment status and ability to pay.

Many of the undersigned have been fighting, organizing, writing, and litigating about the urgent need for action for decades. Now is the moment to commit that we will no longer tolerate sacrifice zones, and to eradicate them through proactive policies.

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