

5

OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE



The Green Budget Coalition recommends funding the establishment of a permanent, high-level Office of Environmental Justice, housed at ECCC, to:

- Lead the development of a national strategy on environmental racism and environmental justice and support its implementation;
- Work with ECCC's enforcement branch to advance environmental justice through the enforcement of federal environmental laws in underserved communities;
- Develop a publicly-accessible screening and mapping tool that overlays environmental, health and socio-demographic data; and
- Develop collaborative partnerships and manage a new environmental justice community grants fund.

Total Recommended Investment:

\$555 million over five years, and then \$77 million per year, ongoing [ECCC]

Photos: left, Hudson Hintze; right, Levi Guzman

Background, Rationale, and Details

Too often in Canada, racialized and disadvantaged communities bear a disproportionate burden from environmental degradation and preventable environmental health hazards, such as pollution and toxic substances in consumer products. Environmental injustice exacerbates climate change impacts and other inequities that these communities experience.

The Government of Canada needs to invest in institutional capacity, as well as research and community capacity building, to ensure that environmental protection programs, policies, investments and laws account for community and population-level inequities and advance environmental justice.

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies.²⁴

Source: U.S. EPA Office of Environmental Justice

A model exists in the United States. The EPA Office of Environmental Justice was established in the early 1990s. In 2021, President Biden established a White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council to “bring greater visibility to environmental justice issues across the Federal Government.”²⁵

We recommend Budget 2025 provide funding to establish a permanent and high-level Office of Environmental Justice in Canada, with the following focus areas.

1. National strategy

(\$125 million over five years, and then \$25 million per year, ongoing)

The *National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Act* received Royal Assent on June 20, 2024. This new law requires the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to develop a strategy to advance environmental justice and assess, prevent and address environmental racism. The Minister must table the strategy in Parliament within two years, and report every five years on its implementation. The Green Budget Coalition notes that ECCC reallocated resources in 2022 to initiate work and prepare for consultations on the strategy.

Funding for the Office of Environmental Justice should include resources needed to continue community consultations, finalize the strategy and support its implementation on an ongoing basis. The Office should also support implementation of related environmental justice requirements in recent amendments to the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* (Bill S-5), and be consulted on program design to ensure that federal

24 Environmental Protection Agency, “Learn About Environmental Justice, US EPA.” <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice>

25 The White House, “White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council.” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/environmentaljustice/white-house-environmental-justice-advisory-council/>

climate and nature programs will benefit communities that have historically been overburdened by environmental harm.

Resources must be sufficient to enable an approach that recognizes each community's unique context and needs and distinguishes between Indigenous Nations and governments and other racialized and marginalized communities that do not hold inherent Indigenous rights and jurisdiction.

2. Environmental enforcement (**\$200 million over five years, and then \$40 million per year, ongoing**)

Uneven enforcement of environmental protection laws contributes to environmental racism and environmental injustice. Holding polluters accountable for violations that disproportionately impact Indigenous, BIPOC, and low-income communities is an environmental justice priority. However, these communities face multiple barriers in accessing justice.

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) announced a new comprehensive environmental justice enforcement strategy and established a dedicated Office of Environmental Justice. Its mission is to protect overburdened and underserved communities from the harm caused by environmental crimes, pollution, and climate change.²⁶

The Office of Environmental Justice in Canada should play a similar role. Additional resources are needed to enable ECCC's enforcement branch to prioritize and enhance investigation, compliance and enforcement activities in communities most overburdened by environmental harm. Funds received from fines, court orders and voluntary payments as a result of enforcement action should be earmarked for projects that will benefit the affected community and advance environmental justice.

²⁶ United States Department of Justice, "Office of Environmental Justice." <https://www.justice.gov/oej>



Photo: Kari Magnuson

3. Screening and mapping tool (**\$30 million in 2025 to develop the tool, then \$10 million per year, ongoing**)

Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy 2019-2022 included a commitment to enhance collection of disaggregated data (i.e., data that can be broken down by meaningful categories of race and/or ethno-cultural origins). However, this information is missing from important environmental and environmental health databases and indicators, such as the National Pollutant Release Inventory, the Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators, Canadian Health Measures Survey, MIREC (Maternal-Infant Research on Environmental Chemicals) and ambient air quality reporting.

The U.S. EPA Office of Environmental Justice developed "EJScreen," an online mapping and screening tool that provides a nationally consistent dataset and approach for integrating environmental and sociodemographic indicators. We recommend ECCC consult on and develop a similar tool for Canada. It should include data on Indigeneity, racialization, income and other socio-demographic indicators. In addition to helping identify locations with potential environmental justice concerns and environmental health risks, this tool would enable ECCC to measure and track the effectiveness of the new strategy. Federal environmental databases and indicators should also be expanded to enable environmental justice analysis.

4. Collaborative partnerships and grants (**\$10 million over five years, and then \$2 million per year, ongoing, to support collaborative partnerships; and \$150 million over five years for community grants.**)

The Office of Environmental Justice in Canada will be well-placed to play a convening role, bringing together relevant federal departments and agencies, leveraging external expertise, exploring collaboration with Indigenous and provincial/territorial governments, and engaging with communities. We also recommend a new environmental justice community grants fund to be managed by the Office of Environmental Justice. The fund could be used to enable community groups to hire technical experts, participate in consultative processes, and fund local solutions (among other needs).

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This recommendation is endorsed by the Canadian Coalition for Environment and Climate Justice, the ENRICH Project, and the Black Environmental Initiative.



Photo: Hendrik Morkel