



Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

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DEM IS SEEKING COMMUNITY INPUT, FEEDBACK ON DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE POLICY

PROVIDENCE, RI – The Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is asking the public to review and critique its draft environmental justice (EJ) policy to ensure it does what DEM intends it to do – that is, to build a framework for documenting, understanding, and directing solutions at the historic and disproportionate burden of environmental hazards faced by minority and low-income communities in Rhode Island.



For generations, EJ communities in Rhode Island have endured both a disproportionate burden of pollution and a deficit of outdoor facilities and amenities. Left: Port of Providence as seen from I-95; right: the spray park at Joslin Recreation Center in the Olneyville section of Providence. Funding from a DEM Outdoor Recreation Grant in 2016 paid for improvements at the spray park including shade sails, landscaping, and play structures.

EJ means all Rhode Islanders – regardless of income, race, ethnicity, national origin, or zip code – have a right to live in a clean and healthy environment and to access environmental amenities like parks, playgrounds, and outdoor spaces. DEM has embedded EJ considerations into some environmental protection initiatives such as [community scale air toxics monitoring](#) in the EJ neighborhoods surrounding the Port of Providence and the assessment and remediation of brownfield sites that often are located in low-wealth communities across the state. But the agency recognizes it has much work to do.

“We’re putting EJ at the center of what we do because, historically in Rhode Island, neither environmental burdens nor environmental benefits including investment in infrastructure has been shared equally,” said DEM Director Terry Gray. “DEM recognizes that all Rhode Islanders deserve to live in healthy, thriving communities, but, in fact, too many people lack access to safe places to live, work, learn, play, and grow. We also recognize that we have a key role in changing this situation for the better.”

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The draft DEM policy defines an “Environmental Justice Focus Area” as a census tract that meets one or more of the following criteria:

- Annual median household income is not more than 65% of the statewide annual median household income;
- Minority population is equal to or greater than 40% of the population;
- 25% or more of the households lack English language proficiency; and/or
- Minorities constitute 25% or more of the population and the annual median household income of the municipality in which the proposed area does not exceed 150% of the statewide annual median household income.

“We want the feedback and updating process to be dynamic so that, ultimately, DEM’s EJ policy includes ample representation from the communities whose voices have long been ignored,” said DEM Climate Justice Specialist Chris Gaynor. “We’re not the experts on EJ; we’re a conduit to achieve EJ, and we are asking community organizations, neighborhood groups, faith communities, elected officials, and advocates for marginalized communities, including low-income communities and communities of color, to share their perspectives. We at DEM need to be better at understanding the needs of the public within our roles as regulators, permittees, and decision-makers. We must strive toward an inclusive future which uplifts all Rhode Island residents.”

The link to the draft policy can be found on [this webpage](#) under the section titled **RIDEM Environmental Justice Policy**. DEM encourages anyone who’s interested in guiding state EJ policy and DEM’s own efforts at becoming a fairer public agency that communicates better with its many diverse constituencies to read the policy and offer feedback by emailing DEM.EJ@dem.ri.gov.

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