



Minnesota Environmental Partnership Commitment to Environmental Justice

December 2023

Minnesota Environmental Partnership (MEP) is a state-wide coalition of over 70 environmental and conservation organizations - and other groups that align with MEP's mission and collaborative approach - that advocate together for clean air and water, clean energy and a healthy environment for all Minnesotans.

As an entity that formally represents a broad cross-section of a historically white-led environmental/conservation community, we have been on a journey in recent years marked by our desire and responsibility to engage our membership in centering environmental justice.

This journey is reflected in MEP revising its vision statement in 2019 to include putting "people and the planet first to ensure a prosperous and sustainable future for all" and its mission "as a coalition that ... builds collective power to secure a healthy environment for all Minnesotans." These changes are indicative of MEP's transition from a focus on the environment separate from people to a recognition of the interdependence between people and the planet.

In June 2021, the MEP Board approved an Equity Statement where it articulated that the reference to "Healthy environment" in its mission statement "refers to the underlying importance of human health in environmental work and especially of frontline communities." In this Equity statement MEP acknowledged "there is a large disparity between MEP's current work areas and the needs of Minnesota's Environmental Justice Communities." MEP articulated in its 2022 Collaborative Priorities - *Building forward at the scale and pace our communities need: Climate Change • Healthy Ecosystems • Racial Justice* - its commitment to "ensuring environmental and racial justice is centered in policy solutions."

Our Values

MEP recognizes the following principles:

- The health and well-being of the environment and humanity is closely interconnected. When the environment flourishes, so does humanity.
- The people who contribute least to environmental harm, pollution and climate change are suffering the worst consequences.
- To effectively respond to environmental challenges affecting our cities, state, nation and global community requires a holistic approach that recognizes the interdependence between environmental justice, racial justice and economic justice.

- A just response to climate change and environmental pollution requires listening to and learning from communities of color, low-income communities, and Tribal and Indigenous communities who directly experience the effects of pollution and climate disruption where they live, work and play. We believe that any real climate and environmental policy solutions must center the voices of environmental justice communities.
- The environmental community can often talk about environmental problems in a technical manner. MEP recognizes the importance of rooting environmental concerns in science as well as in people's lived reality and local expertise such as Indigenous knowledge.
- We believe we are stronger together, when the environmental community and environmental justice leaders, communities and organizations can advocate together for shared environmental policy concerns.
- We must honor our treaty rights and responsibilities to Indigenous people and Tribal communities in Minnesota. We recognize respect for the rights of Indigenous Minnesotans - who have long coexisted with our natural systems and have the right to hunt, fish and gather to feed their bodies and spirits - is intertwined with respect for the rights of nature and wildlife.

Our Efforts

As part of this commitment to environmental and racial justice, MEP is working with its membership to highlight the interconnection between environmental degradation, pollution, public health and *who* is most impacted, as well as prioritizing building partnerships with the environmental justice community and working together to identify common areas of concern. We believe the knowledge and concerns of environmental justice communities are essential to inform our coalition and policy work and that MEP's expertise in policy development and relationships with decision makers can help us to jointly advance community concerns with a focus on state and federal policy.

MEP is working with the Environmental Justice Coordinating Council (EJCC) and its Black and Brown leadership base of environmental and social justice change agents, who are working cooperatively to understand and address the environmental justice overburden in their communities. MEP Director of Advocacy and Inclusion, Cecilia Calvo, is an EJCC Fellow. EJCC is doing excellent work to engage community members, build strong relationships and alliances and to identify pressing community concerns that can be addressed through policy change. MEP and EJCC have worked together in support of the recently passed cumulative impacts law, policies to address the environmental health concerns posed by PFAS in our environment and water, constitutional rededication of lottery dollars to the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, and legislation to replace harmful lead drinking water service lines across Minnesota.

MEP is part of the leadership team of the Frontline Communities Protection (FCP) Coalition that brings together leaders of frontline community organizations and environmental organizations to center environmental justice challenges and policies to respond to the needs of frontline communities who most directly experience the impacts of environmental harm and pollution. This coalition works together to address environmental injustice at a systemic level, and to support various fights for environmental justice across the state. The FCP Coalition came together with the goal of addressing Minnesota's broken regulatory system, which has repeatedly failed to protect the most vulnerable communities from

pollution. The Frontline Communities Protection Coalition is led by Communities Organizing Latino Power and Action (COPAL) and the Minnesota Environmental Justice Table.

Recent Wins for Environmental Justice and Public Health

The 2023 Minnesota Legislative Session was the most positive in decades for the environment, climate, and public health. MEP, working with environmental and community partners, advocated for these historic commitments to protect Minnesota's clean air and water, advance environmental justice and ensure a just transition toward clean energy.

Cumulative Impacts Law

Through the FCP coalition, we worked with environmental justice champions at the legislature to pass a groundbreaking new Cumulative Impacts Law that requires permit decisions for new or expanded sources of pollution in overburdened communities to consider existing pollution. This is a major step to address the role large facilities play in degrading air quality and health in environmental justice communities - communities that already bear the burden of unwanted concentrated pollution that impacts their health and wellbeing. This law covers the seven-county metro area, Duluth and Rochester and provides an option for Tribal Nations to include their territory.

Lead Service Line Replacement

More than 100,000 homes still have lead service lines (LSL) in Minnesota. This major source of harmful lead exposure via drinking water disproportionately impacts low-income and diverse communities where it is more often found in water pipes. MEP worked with local communities to test for lead in residential water supplies in Duluth which helped drive the city to ramp up its LSL replacement work. MEP, working with an array of partners, led efforts to develop and launch the Lead Service Lines Replacement law that allocates \$240 million in state funding to identify and replace harmful lead drinking water service lines across the state. This new program kicks off a 10-year effort to replace all of these supply lines to an estimated 100,000 households without cost to the property owners.

ENRTF and Community-Based Solutions Program

Thanks to the broad collaboration between MEP and environmental and community partners, the Legislature passed legislation giving Minnesota voters the chance to once again reauthorize the dedication of some lottery proceeds to the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and also expand its allocations to benefit low-income and communities of color through a new community grants program. The Trust Fund is a powerful tool for protecting, conserving, and restoring Minnesota's air, land, and water. The creation of a community grants program will help further environmental justice in Minnesota by supporting community based projects with the priority to respond to environment degradation and related health concerns of communities historically overburdened by pollution.