



National Science and Technology Council (NSTC)
Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology (SOST)



Environmental Justice Position Statement

Background:

Environmental justice in the United States is grounded in the belief that all communities should have the benefits of clean air, clean water, and healthy surroundings where they live, work, play, learn, and grow. The reality is that low-income and marginalized people, particularly Black, Latino, Indigenous, and other communities of color, are disproportionately impacted by environmental harms, such as air and water pollution, extreme weather events, and climate change impacts.¹ The modern-day environmental justice movement emerged in the 1960s-80s through social and civil rights activism, advocacy, and research by Black, Latino, and Indigenous leaders.² This early work documented disproportionate environmental harms in communities of color and provides key principles and conceptual frameworks through which environmental injustices can be addressed.

To advance environmental justice, decision-makers and researchers must acknowledge the role that current and past policies and practices, both intentional and unintentional, have had in creating or perpetuating inequities in the use of terrestrial and marine spaces across the country, and the resulting environmental and health outcomes. Federal agencies and interagency groups are critical to enacting the changes needed to advance environmental justice for all. Recognition of the importance of environmental justice is woven throughout Biden-Harris Administration activities.³ President Biden's priorities of addressing the climate crisis, building a resilient economy, and safeguarding public health guide Federal actions in support of environmental justice. This is particularly demonstrated by the Justice40 Initiative which directs Federal agencies to deliver 40 percent of the overall benefits of Federal climate, clean energy, clean water, and other investments to disadvantaged communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution.⁴

The Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology (SOST) is the lead interagency entity for Federal coordination on ocean science and technology, reporting to both the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) and the Ocean Policy Committee (OPC).⁵ Fully integrating environmental justice into SOST actions requires careful consideration of the needs of impacted coastal and marine communities and the capabilities and missions of SOST agencies. Many agencies have existing programs related to environmental justice, and while each agency individually responds to Executive Orders and Administration direction, the

¹ <https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/documents/whiteh2.pdf>

² <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-timeline>

³ EO 13985, EO 13990, EO 14008, Harris remarks 10/21, Statements from Biden administration staff, Ocean Policy Committee meeting 10/21

⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2021/07/20/the-path-to-achieving-justice40/>

⁵ <https://www.noaa.gov/ocean-science-and-technology-subcommittee>

SOST is uniquely situated to improve collective understanding, coordination, and action on environmental justice across ocean sciences, technologies, programmatic activities, funding, and data applications. Additionally, SOST members, SOST IWGs, and participants in SOST events have directly called for increased guidance and clarification on how environmental justice applies to their work and the aggregate direction of the SOST. Feedback from SOST members has been documented, synthesized, and used to directly inform this statement and the actions listed in the implementation section below.

This document is an explicit acknowledgment of SOST commitment to recognizing and addressing environmental justice in its own work. By clarifying immediate opportunities for action and providing a common reference point for goals through this document, the SOST can establish a foundation from which future interagency environmental justice actions can evolve.

Definitions:

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 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.”⁶ Environmental justice also can and should apply to the creation and use of scientific data, products, and knowledge. This definition is the most commonly referenced explanation of environmental justice in Federal government settings and will be used by the SOST as a reference point for consistency. Environmental justice communities are defined as “a geographic location with significant representation of persons of color, low-income persons, indigenous persons, or members of Tribal nations, where such persons experience, or are at risk of experiencing, higher or more adverse human health or environmental outcomes.”⁷ In conjunction with these foundational definitions, environmental justice is also closely tied to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility broadly. It is also related to other topical forms of justice such as climate or energy justice, as actions to mitigate the impacts of climate change or provide sustainable energy inherently impact environmental settings. However, environmental justice is distinctly focused on interactions among people and their environments, with a rich history in grassroots leadership. Environmental justice calls for specific outcomes, such as acknowledging root causes of environmental inequity, equitable distribution of environmental resources and risks (including science delivery), and equitable participation in decision-making processes (including science development) that impact the environments where people live, learn, worship, and work (See Footnote ⁸ for one example of scholarship on this topic) – all outcomes encompassed within the EPA definition.

⁶ <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>

⁷ https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/documents/whejac_interim_final_recommendations_0.pdf

⁸ Scholsberg, David. "Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism: The Challenge of Difference for Environmentalism." (2002).

Environmental Justice & the SOST:

As the lead interagency entity for Federal coordination on ocean science and technology (S&T), the SOST plays a key role in shaping the direction of activities and investments for the broader ocean community. As a body, the SOST acknowledges:

- Just processes and just allocation of resources and risks strengthen the ocean S&T enterprise and help ensure that end products and services meet the needs of a broad spectrum of society, including low-income and marginalized communities at home and abroad. (See Footnote⁹ for a perspective focused on ocean science and technology)
- To be effective, actions related to interagency coordination on environmental justice at the SOST level should be driven by the needs of impacted communities to the extent feasible within the scope and capabilities of SOST interagency working groups (IWGs). The SOST will support each IWG within the unique context of its participating agency missions and scientific fields.

Implementation:

While written statements such as this one can be an important tool in elevating and making visible environmental justice priorities, statements alone are not enough. The SOST will prioritize environmental justice by:

- Facilitating trainings and providing educational opportunities to expand SOST members understanding of environmental justice
- Coordinating the integration of environmental justice into SOST IWG work plans and reporting on environmental justice progress during Biannual IWG Check-In Meetings
- Developing a “living” document of SOST and SOST IWG activities related to environmental justice, to be accessible online for reference by all SOST members
- Sharing information on environmental justice best practices across NSTC and OPC groups through discussions at regularly scheduled meetings
- Engaging environmental justice points of contact within each SOST agency and fostering intra-agency environmental justice conversations related to SOST discussions and activities
- Regularly evaluating implementation of just practices within the structure and function of the SOST itself, including reevaluation of this environmental justice statement
- Maintaining strong relationships with agency representatives and other ocean S&T practitioners (e.g., academia, industry, NGO, etc.) to better understand the context of environmental justice beyond the Federal government, for example through recurring public engagement opportunities

All questions about how the SOST will work towards incorporating environmental justice should be directed to SOST Executive Secretaries.

⁹ <https://tos.org/oceanography/article/strategies-for-increasing-diversity-in-the-ocean-science-workforce-through>