
Date: Jan. 21, 2021

To: Environmental Quality Commission

From: Richard Whitman, Director
Nancy Bennett, Policy and External Affairs Manager

Subject: Item I: Racial justice and equity work at DEQ (Informational)
Jan. 21-22, 2021, EQC meeting

Purpose of this item Along with many other institutions, DEQ is in the midst of significant work and dialog around racial justice, diversity and equity. This effort concerns both the agency's roles and responsibilities regarding people and communities that have experienced a disproportionate environmental burden, and how to strengthen diversity within DEQ.

As Oregon's lead state agency for protecting the environment, and with significant responsibilities around public health, these are important issues for DEQ and the EQC to grapple with. Historically, state government has been part of the system that has encouraged communities of color and lower-income households to be situated in, near and around less desirable and (in some cases) outright dangerous uses and activities, ranging from the siting of freeways in the post-war period to the locations of industrial districts beginning in the early 1900s. By not addressing the localized environmental and public health dangers created by locating these uses near or even right next to each other, DEQ shares responsibility for this history, along with the corresponding responsibility to act to redress these wrongs going forward.

In this agenda item, DEQ will describe some of work that is being done to advance diversity, equity and inclusion within DEQ, as well as efforts to further integrate environmental and climate justice into both policy development and program implementation. This will include brief descriptions of leading efforts to engage communities of color in policy development and program implementation decisions. Due to the limited time available, this is intended to be an introductory presentation. DEQ will be seeking feedback from the EQC about the commission's desire to be more closely engaged in particular aspects of this work. One specific request for the commission is that it provide input to DEQ on a statement of the agency's value(s) around equity and diversity as we develop an updated vision and values statement as part of the agency's strategic plan.

Background

DEI Work Within DEQ

Governor Brown has been a strong proponent for diversity, equity and inclusion. From Executive Order 17-11, which provided specific expectations for state agencies in advancing diversity, to her more recent creation of the Racial Justice Council and her Equity Framework for COVID-19 Response and Recovery, the Governor is showing leadership for all of Oregon in advancing equity as a core component of how we work together and what we are working to achieve.

Working with DEQ's Labor Management Committee, DEQ's Leadership Team launched a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Workgroup. At the same time, DEQ began incorporating DEI elements into manager training, and into annual evaluations, as well as requiring implicit bias training for all DEQ employees involved in hiring. More recently, DEQ's annual manager conference included training on racial justice in Oregon.

Most recently, BIPOC staff and managers within DEQ have formed their own support groups to share their experiences working at DEQ, provide input to DEQ leadership, and to share ideas and concepts and work about how the agency could be more effective in addressing equity issues in its work to protect communities and public health. This is a new, but exciting development that holds significant promise for improving DEQ's culture and how we can be more effective in carrying out our mission, and I want to thank the individuals who have stepped up to participate.

Moving forward, DEQ expects to support an expanded and more active DEI Committee along with BIPOC and other groups, to continue to work on on-boarding that is more sensitive to cultural and racial diversity, to take specific steps to build and strengthen relationships with educational institutions to improve the agency's record in recruiting, and to continue training for agency leadership, managers and staff around equity and diversity.

Equity and Inclusion as a Key Component of DEQ's External Work

In the past, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has supported state environmental agencies to better incorporate environmental justice into the programs they administer. DEQ has worked to build capacity to use tools like EJ Screen to understand the equity impacts of agency actions, but the actual use of such tools in programs has been relatively ad hoc and the tools need to be improved. DEQ has been an active partner with the Environmental Justice Task Force in reporting on key program actions and decisions with significant equity consequences.

Moving forward, Governor Brown, with the support of the Racial Justice Council, is proposing to further institutionalize environmental and climate justice work through the creation of the Environmental Justice Council, which will be housed in and supported by DEQ. The council will work with DEQ, the EQC and other Oregon agencies to develop regular work plans that identify agency-specific priorities and actions to further environmental justice. That effort will be supported by staffing, and by the development (over time) of tools that provide a consistent means to evaluate the environmental and climate justice effects of agency policy and programmatic actions.

In the meantime, DEQ also is incorporating environmental justice and inclusion into several specific and significant programs including the Oregon Climate Protection Program, Cleaner Air Oregon, and Materials Management. This work includes providing resources to BIPOC communities to support their participation and engagement in program development and implementation.

Finally, DEQ also is focusing on equity and racial justice in our strategic planning effort. The strategic plan that is early stages of development will incorporate an equity lens as a core value for how the agency carries out its mission, as well as specific operational goals that the agency uses to evaluate performance.

DEQ has a responsibility to push for equity and inclusion in public health and environmental policy, programs and outcomes. DEQ recognizes that it has participated in carrying out programs and policies that have contributed to environmental and health disparities for communities of color, tribal nations, and other underrepresented communities, and that DEQ has a responsibility to help move Oregon to an equitable future through its programs and authorities.

As part of this responsibility DEQ must: (a) make an intentional practice of reaching out to, and including tribal nations, communities of color, and other underrepresented communities in significant policy development and program implementation efforts; (b) make clear how decisions will be made and how these communities can influence them; (c) identify policy and program choices that could not only avoid further harm, but reverse past harms; and (d) consider, evaluate and communicate the equity impacts of DEQ's actions.

**EQC
involvement**

DEQ would appreciate more in-depth engagement with the EQC on both the internal DEI work and the external work for racial and climate justice. At a minimum, DEQ wants EQC input on a strong statement of the agency's values and vision around diversity and equity and inclusion. We will

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continue to provide periodic updates to the commission regarding agency actions for more equitable government processes and environmental outcomes. As policy and regulatory changes are needed to accomplish these goals, DEQ will bring proposals for commission consideration and action.