

Testimony on Senate Bill 286
Senate Committee on Energy and Environment
February 9, 2021

Chair Beyer, Vice-Chair Findley and members of the Committee:

My name is Sam Baraso and I'm writing in support of Senate Bill 286.

While I serve as Vice Chair of the Environmental Quality Commission, I am testifying here representing myself.

I want to start by acknowledging that Oregon was an early leader in recognizing that communities facing disparities in their exposure to pollutants and disparities in their ability to connect with the very institutions that are charged with protecting their environment, need a dedicated voice to elevate issues to the agencies who may otherwise overlook these voices. Not because of malice on the part of state agencies, but because our regulatory systems are simply hard to connect with despite our best intentions to make them accessible.

That early leadership resulted in the creation of the Environmental Justice Task Force (EJTF). And in the over 13 years of its existence, the EJTF has helped so many of Oregon's natural resource agencies better understand how to engage environmental justice communities while elevating areas of concern.

However, it has also been no secret that the EJTF has been severely limited given its lack of staffing. I do not believe this was ok in 2007 when the EJTF was established, but I will assume it reflected what was possible. Today, this is wholly inadequate as we talk about being responsive to the needs of Black and brown communities, people with low incomes and others most impacted by our policies.

Having served on the EQC for over four years now, I can attest to the fact that adequate staffing makes a difference. It empowers me to serve in my volunteer role, it allows me to ask questions of staff, to get answers, to visit different parts of the state and connect and hear from so many of our communities, and to make informed decisions. Adequate funding assures that my perspectives are valued, and not tokenized, that I am able to make a difference. It assures that voices of community that come before me are not only heard, but elevated.

The need for adequate resourcing of an Environmental Justice Council does not stand alone. It must be paired with good data- data that reflects one's actual lived experience. As recently as last month, I was reviewing state data that displayed racial disparities in exposure to air pollution. Yet the conversation was happening with ten-year-old data that left much to be desired. Ten years ago, a simple snapshot of our environment might have been ok. Today, it is not. This bill mirrors good work on data tools that allow us all to better understand our environment. Tools not too dissimilar from those developed in Minnesota, Colorado and Washington in recent years.

It is about time that we catch up with our ideals, our words and take another step forward in making our state more responsive to the needs of our communities. I thank you for your time today and ask for your support of Senate Bill 286.