



Deborah Kafoury Multnomah County Chair

February 7, 2022

Representative Pam Marsh, Chair
House Committee On Environment and Natural Resources
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Multnomah County Support for HB 4077

Dear Chair Marsh, Vice Chairs Hudson and Brock Smith, and Members of the Committee:

Multnomah County urges your support of House Bill 4077. This bill is arguably the most important effort in a generation to address environmental injustice in Oregon. In the face of a growing climate crisis and historic inequities that have remained unaddressed, the State has a moral duty and a practical interest in strengthening environmental justice statutes.

For too long, the communities most burdened by pollution and most threatened by a warming climate have been unheard at best and willfully ignored at worst. It is time for the State to embrace community voices, institutionalize their knowledge into natural resource agency policy-making, and ensure the administrative capacity exists within the State government to carry those practices forward.

Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other historically marginalized communities are disproportionately exposed to emissions, pollution and other harmful externalities as a result of policy decisions. The data shows that there is most likely a higher concentration of nearly any pollutant present in environmental justice communities. This is certainly true in Multnomah

County, where diesel PM pollution¹ and wood smoke pollution,² as well as urban heat islands,³ are all concentrated in neighborhoods with higher rates of residents of color.

One of the primary ways that environmental injustices manifest is in population health, as low-income and BIPOC community members experience a greater risk of disease and premature death related to environmental hazards. Among the conditions affected by these hazards are respiratory and cardiovascular disease, underlying conditions that have worsened the health impacts of COVID-19 on communities of color throughout the pandemic. As the Local Public Health Authority, it is Multnomah County's duty to protect the health of our community, and we need strong and committed partnership with state agencies to make progress toward eliminating these disparities.

Governmental policy-making around the environment and natural resources that fails to center environmental justice will only perpetuate unjust and inequitable outcomes. Multnomah County's Environmental Justice Resolution, adopted in 2018, mitigates that risk by directing the County to apply an environmental justice lens in our sustainability and environmental health work.⁴ This approach has helped us to put our limited resources, including staff time, toward the highest-priority environmental issues and, in our experience, has ultimately led to better policy making.

Although Oregon environmental agencies have been subject to environmental justice obligations in state administrative rule and law since 1993, these efforts have fallen short. For example, Oregon's 2008 environmental justice law, SB 420 (codified as ORS 182.538 et seq.), established the Environmental Justice Task Force, but also mandated that state natural resources agencies address environmental justice issues as part of their standard operations.⁵ All of the State's natural resource agencies have fallen short of implementing this law, with some completely ignoring the law entirely. To date listed natural resource agencies have just hired, or not yet

¹ Multnomah County Health Department. 2014 Report Card on Racial and Ethnic Disparities. Portland 2014.

² Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. *Portland Area Pollutant Summary Sheets/Maps for Air Toxics*. Portland 2012.

³ Hoffman, Shandas, Pendleton. "The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas." *Climate*. 13 January 2020.

⁴ Multnomah County, *Resolution 2018-108* (Nov. 8, 2018), <https://multco.us/file/76250/download>.

⁵ State of Oregon Environmental Justice Task Force. *Environmental Justice: Best Practices for Oregon's Natural Resource Agencies*. Salem, Oregon, January, 2016.

hired, a full-time position to focus on environmental justice, let alone provide the administrative support to make such a position successful. Further, the Environmental Environmental Justice Task Force (“the Task Force”) has lacked dedicated professional staff and other administrative support commensurate with their critical role.

Despite limited resources, the Task Force has accomplished important work in elevating the concerns of environmental justice communities to the state level. HB 4077 changes the name of the Task Force to the Environmental Justice Council (“the Council”), and establishes administrative support for the Council within the Department of Environmental Quality. In addition, the bill directs the Department of Environmental Quality and the Oregon Health Authority to examine the cumulative impacts of pollution on environmental justice communities, which would offer us a greatly enhanced understanding of environmental problems in our state. The tools developed under this statute would be greatly beneficial to local governments and other state agencies.

The changes proposed in HB 4077 are long overdue but welcome, and offer necessary corrective actions that will improve consideration of environmental justice in Oregon. Multnomah County remains committed to advancing environmental justice through our work and looks forward to supporting the Council’s efforts to do the same across Oregon. We urge the legislature to seize this important opportunity and pass HB 4077.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deborah Kafoury". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Deborah Kafoury
Multnomah County Chair