

Actualizing Equity in Environmental & Climate Justice

While the Inflation Reduction Act will unleash historic federal funding to reduce CO2 emissions, it has sparked critical discussions about its lack of intentionality in centering frontline communities, environmental justice and reparations in addressing climate change and advancing clean energy. How are organizers in the Twin Cities ensuring the most historically and systemically harmed communities are prioritized in climate action work? At our September 2022 Actualizing Equity event we discussed this and more with Janiece Watts from Fresh Energy, Tee McClenty from MN350, Bob Blake from Native Sun, and Dominique Diaddigo-Cash from the Sierra Club North Star Chapter.

How do we center environmental justice in responding to the climate crisis?



Intentional investments

The Inflation Reduction Act unleashes game-changing incentives and funding for renewable energy projects — including measures that will support decolonizing the electric grid and provide transformative benefits to tribal nations. But, without intentionality to the disproportionate impact of oil drilling, the legislation also directly harms frontline communities by guaranteeing additional investment in fossil fuels.



Frontline priorities

Federal legislation is often a top-down approach, when the policy agendas for environmental justice must be articulated by the frontline communities most impacted by past and ongoing harms. When legislation is heralded as “historic,” it’s important to consider why: who and what has been overlooked or ignored before to make the measure significant?



Create alternatives

True transformation, justice and equity will only come with the creation of alternative systems -- not tweaking an industrial, extractive economy. As organizers and advocates, we must invest time and ingenuity in dreaming and creating those alternatives.



Systemic solutions

While providing additional choices around where our energy comes from and potentially expanding access to electric cars is beneficial, it’s critical to focus on systemic solutions to collective problems. Centering individual actions can obscure the larger impacts structural paradigms — from outsized spending on the military to starving resources for public transit — actually have on addressing the climate crisis in an effective and enduring way.



Consistent organizing

Climate action can feel disconnected from the daily lives of many people in our communities. It is incumbent on advocates to be consistently showing up for and organizing with those most impacted by pollution and environmental injustice to understand the issues they face everyday and integrate those concerns and frames into our collective climate action.



Organizational Reflection

The largest and most visible environmental organizations, as well as philanthropic institutions, must continue to investigate and root out racism and exclusion in their internal operations, external priorities and overall approach to climate justice.

Examples of environmental justice in action

Solar Bear and Native Sun

Native Sun's vision is to help Native nations use renewable energy systems for Native communities, train a Native renewable energy workforce, educate young people about climate change and the environment, and develop civic skills and capacity among Native people to provide leadership for a just transition and the path to energy sovereignty. Its current projects includes the creation of an Upper Midwest Inter-tribal EV Charging Network; the Solar Cub program that helps young tribal members understand the intersections of a healthy environment, climate, energy, and Native culture and act to make progress toward a just energy transition and energy sovereignty; and a Just Solar Workforce program that helps Native people develop the skills to build a clean energy future and enter into careers within the clean energy industry. Learn more at nativesun.org

Mpls Green New Deal

Minneapolis is in the process of updating their 10 year Climate Action Plan. With new federal dollars available, the city has the opportunity to completely transform Minneapolis. The People's Climate & Equity fund, together with Inflation Reduction Act funding, would allow Minneapolis to make 100% carbon free buildings, clean transportation, and stable, healthy neighborhoods available to everyone, no exceptions. Investing in access for all makes the transition to clean energy faster and builds more wealth in our communities. It also allows us to make sure clean energy jobs pay well and to tap into new renewable resources like networked geothermal. The People's Climate & Equity Plan from MN350 envisions a Minneapolis in which every person – regardless of zip code, race, or ability – lives in an equitable, healthy neighborhood and a safe climate. Learn more at mn350.org/peoples-climate-and-equity-plan

Xcel Energy Plan

When Xcel first filed its Integrated Resource Plan in 2019, Sierra Club North Star Chapter was encouraged by Xcel's plans to retire its coal plants by 2030, but discouraged by Xcel's plans to build a huge new gas plant and that Xcel missed opportunities to develop local, equitable energy. Along with many other stakeholders, they developed an alternative plan, the Clean Energy for All Plan, using the same modeling software as Xcel, that would save customers \$2.2 billion while avoiding building new gas plants, as well as increasing rooftop solar, wind, battery storage and utility scale solar. In a huge victory for Minnesotans, Xcel responded to growing opposition to new fossil generation by dropping its proposal to build the Sherco gas plant – and new relationships and coalitions were forged to catalyze future fights. Learn more at www.sierraclub.org/minnesota

BIPOC EJ Table

The "Hennepin Energy Recovery Center" (HERC) is one of the biggest producers of toxic emissions in the county, and ranks as one of the top emitters for almost all criteria pollutants identified by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. In 2002, the HERC trash burner was responsible for 52% of all dioxins – extremely toxic chemicals that cause cancer, reproductive and developmental problems, damage to the immune system, and can interfere with hormones – emitted in the *entire state.* The Minnesota BIPOC EJ Table has been focused on shutting the HERC down! Beyond that, though, the table is also working against new landfills, and moving Hennepin County to zero waste. They're pushing the county to address the plastic crisis far upstream and prevent community from being displaced as they clean up their land and property values increase. Learn more about the group at www.facebook.com/mnejtable

Learn more about Actualizing Equity at thealliancet.org/actualizing-equity