

A New Era — but Hard Work Ahead

I never dared to imagine a period of government commitment to environmental justice like the one we are currently experiencing. Following through will of course be the measure of the new administration, but for now we can celebrate that President Biden has signed a series of executive orders charging the federal government with fighting systemic racism, tackling the climate crisis, addressing public health inequities, and more.

Executive Order 13985 reads: “The federal government should pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all.” It also declares that “affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of our government.” The EO specifically includes “people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.”

Observers could not miss the symbolism of the president’s signing this order in his very first hours in office. The Biden administration is serious about attacking racial inequities at their foundation and across the whole of the federal government.

Also on January 20, President Biden signed Executive Order 13990, which is titled “Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis.” While noting the government’s historical role in environmental protection, it observes, “Where the federal government has failed to meet that commitment in the past, it must advance environmental justice.” Not only is the president mandating gains in overall public health, such as reducing exposure to dangerous chemicals, Biden promises “to hold polluters accountable, includ-



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ing those who disproportionately harm communities of color and low-income communities.” Indeed, his administration will “prioritize both environmental justice and the creation of the well-paying union jobs necessary to deliver on these goals.”

Heretofore we’d focused on broad-based environmental policy discussions while working to insert the term environmental justice into the federal government’s lexicon. We worked hard over decades to see the incorporation of concepts like disproportionate and cumulative impacts, environmentally overburdened communities, and enforcement of civil rights protections against racial discrimination by recipients of federal environmental financial assistance.

We also worked to include justice and equity considerations in the reauthorization of various bedrock environmental statutes and their implementing regulations piece by piece. But this administration seems intent on centering racial and environmental justice as among its base organizing principles. Not in a piecemeal fashion, but in a holistic manner. A “whole of government approach” is one of Biden’s talismans in attacking the country’s severest problems.

Indeed, a “government-wide approach” is a section header for Executive Order 14008: “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,” signed a week after inauguration. In it, the administration promises, “We must listen to science — and act. We must strengthen our clean air and water protections. We must hold polluters accountable for their actions. We must deliver environmental justice in communities all across America.”

But perhaps most significant of all is the \$2 trillion infrastructure package that President Biden put on the table. It calls for big investments in modernizing our water systems, our transportation system (including public transit), ports, energy, and so on. Here too there is a stated goal to rewrite wrongs communities of color have borne from past major infrastructure projects that destroyed or significantly altered whole neighborhoods. Chief among these is replacing all antiquated leaded drinking water lines across the nation.

There’s so much more I’m leaving out, but I will close where I began: it’s a new day. Now the real work of turning words on paper into action begins.