



Environmental Justice Program
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A. Stanley Meiburg
Acting Regional Administrator
EPA Region 4
Sam Nunn Atlanta Federal Center
61 Forsyth Street, SW
Atlanta, GA 30303

Dear Mr. Meiburg,

While I have consulted EPA on issues, argued with EPA and worked alongside EPA over the years to resolve environmental and environmental justice problems in our region, I often find myself frustrated with the assistance EPA is able to offer. And, this frustration is the reason for this letter today. I have worked as a community organizer with the aim of making our communities a safer, healthier place to live and have witnessed firsthand the confusion and lack of direction that comes from within the Environmental Protection Agency.

I will acknowledge that the EPA has some dedicated employees that try to do their best in their specified capacity, but the agency generally is a bureaucracy that is difficult to navigate for the average person next door. There is largely a mistrust of government in general, and a larger mistrust of our federal environmental agency as well. While EPA has established an office of 'environmental justice' and an office to deal with Title VI matters, I have found them to be largely toothless tigers that sometimes leave us more frustrated than when we approached them. These offices and their staff should be places we can go for counsel, for support and for help! Instead, we encounter sluggish inaction.

While I can point to many situations in my home state of Tennessee, I want to focus on an environmental justice issue related to South Carolina. The situation as I recall, dealt with water contamination problems in the small rural community of Williston, South Carolina. I worked with many in this community to try to understand information, get answers, and to ultimately get the place cleaned up. Initially, there were questions about where testing was occurring, and were the borings deep enough, but the questions quickly turned to 'are they telling us the truth and doing all they can'. We would call the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) and they would tell us to go to the EPA Project Manager, which in this case was the beginning of horrors. The treatment we received was less than cordial and appeared to be frequently antagonistic. While documents were placed in the small community library, there were

not enough community meetings to break down the information in understandable chunks for the average citizen to understand. What was needed and desired, was enhanced community outreach techniques that would allow community residents the opportunity to learn what was going on, ask questions and participate in a dignified manner. This did not occur. While there was a communication plan laid out on paper, it was obviously not adequate. The highly technical documents that were placed in the library only led to even more confusion and questions. And, needless to say the lack of or infrequency of community forums and meetings only added to the speculation and rumors that spread across the community like wildfire. Although, we finally reached an end result that some are happy with, it was due to much wrangling, coercing, complaining and even a big protest that largely should have been an embarrassment to EPA Region IV.

Not factoring in ‘environmental justice’ considerations, and not being flexible enough to try different approaches led to the problems that we encountered. There was not a willingness to involve people of color and low income folks at the grassroots level and have them feel a part of the process. There was an ever-present air of ‘we are the experts – how dare you question our work’. There was not a willingness to share information from tests that had occurred. This is arrogance that undermines the public’s confidence in the EPA.

Even though we often invoke Presidential Order 12898, the EPA doesn’t factor EJ into its communications with States and local authorities that will effectively give us relief. EPA does issue recommendations versus mandates, and often will not weigh in at all on a tough issue. States and municipalities in many cases do as they please regarding the EJ issues that greatly impact our quality of life. Residents assume the EPA, functioning as a federal agency will protect them and effectively act in their behalf. We need a better agency going forward; we need stronger environmental protection for sensitive populations, and a more responsive agency that involves communities in a meaningful and effective way – always.

I therefore urge increased interagency communication and cooperation that allows for quick action and resolves problems so they don’t linger unnecessarily. We need bold and innovative approaches that set a tone for change coming from the top of the agency. We should be able to see and feel the difference in our communities on the ground if it’s effective. And, lastly, we must have sensitive, patient, and culturally competent staff and project managers that interact with the public; this is imperative.

We will continue to be hopeful about working with the EPA to make our communities better, and hopefully we can all learn from each other.

Sincerely,



Rita Harris
Regional Representative