

Environmental Justice at Ecology



Pollution and environmental contamination can affect everyone living in Washington, but some people are significantly more burdened than others. Research shows that people of color, low-income people, and indigenous people are disproportionately harmed by environmental hazards like toxic contamination, diesel emissions, and climate change. These environmental exposures have real impacts on the lives of many in Washington, such as:

- Higher rates of illness and disease
- More frequent hospitalization
- Lower life expectancy

We're committed to making decisions that do not place disproportionate burdens on disadvantaged communities. And we seek to lift the weight of pollution and contamination borne by those communities. Focusing our time and resources toward strategic actions to address these long-standing inequities will lead to improvements in health and the environment, and more resilient communities in Washington.

I want to...

- › Find out about Ecology's public meetings and comment periods
- › Learn more about Ecology's commitment to non-discrimination
- › Find out more about Ecology's language access services

"I have a deep personal commitment to environmental justice. It's one of my highest priorities. For me, environmental justice is about achieving the highest environmental quality for Washington's diverse communities. We will work strategically to eliminate environmental and health disparities in communities of color, indigenous communities, and economically disadvantaged communities." Laura Watson, Ecology Director

Advancing environmental justice

Lawmakers took a historic step to eliminate environmental and health disparities in communities of color, indigenous communities, and economically disadvantaged communities by passing the HEAL (Healthy Environment for All) Act in the 2021 legislative session.

This landmark policy makes environmental justice an integral part of the way Washington state does business. The departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Ecology, Health, Natural Resources, Transportation, and the Puget Sound Partnership are all required to conduct EJ assessments and incorporate EJ into strategic plans and budgets. The HEAL Act also creates an EJ Council, interagency workgroup, community engagement plans, tribal consultation processes, and defines what environmental justice is.

The HEAL Act will bring a greater focus and additional resources to over-burdened communities — ensuring that we protect and preserve the environment for every Washingtonian.

Environmental justice at Ecology

Environmental justice is a priority in our efforts to restore and protect land, air, and water. Below are some examples of our work to meaningfully engage communities, and strategically address environmental issues in areas with environmental justice considerations.



What's in My Neighborhood?

We developed and maintain a map of contaminated cleanup sites around the state. This easy-to-use, interactive map allows everyone living in Washington to be able to find contaminated cleanup sites near them. It also provides the latest information on cleanup efforts at each site.

To see what's in your neighborhood, take a look at [our map](#).

Funding affordable housing & public participation in Bellingham

We're working on 12 contaminated cleanup sites in Bellingham Bay. One of them is called "[Georgia Pacific West](#)," an area that has contaminated soil and groundwater from former industrial operations.

We awarded the Port of Bellingham an Integrated Planning Grant to help determine the extent of contamination, and then the Port will work with local affordable housing organizations to study viability of providing healthy and affordable housing options on the site.

Gentrification can be a big problem with cleanup efforts. As areas are cleaned up and developed, local communities are priced out of affordable places to live. This project will help provide affordable homes for those people who could be priced out of the area. Plans also include a food campus for local producers that will incorporate storage, workforce training kitchens, retail and event space, as well as affordable housing. Construction could start as early as 2021.

Using Public Participation Grants, we also help fund, and collaborate with, a local non-profit called RE Sources to help reach and connect with people in the community. Read more about their [environmental justice efforts](#) in Bellingham Bay.

Also, see our website for more information about [cleanup efforts in Bellingham Bay](#).

Striving for equity in the Lower Duwamish Waterway

We're leading efforts to control sources of pollution from the drainage area surrounding the Lower Duwamish Waterway (LDW) Superfund site in Seattle. The [LDW Superfund site](#) is a 5-mile portion of the Duwamish River that flows into Elliott Bay. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) oversees cleanup of the river sediments.

Before sediment cleanup can begin, we need to control the sources of pollution to the river sediments. That means we must investigate more than 20,000 acres of land that drains into the river. [Source control](#) means finding the sources and extent of contamination, then taking actions to stop or reduce them before they reach the LDW.

The Duwamish Valley communities are diverse, encompassing a broad range of backgrounds, cultures, and languages. To effectively engage and involve the community, we conduct environmental justice analyses of project areas using the Environmental Protection Agency's [Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping tool](#). We then tailor outreach strategies to address equity issues.

Providing language access to cleanup information is an important part of public involvement. To assess language needs, we use census data to identify populations speaking languages other than English. We provide translation of written materials and interpretation services in various languages including Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese.

Ensuring that public meetings and open houses integrate with peoples' lives is crucial to support meaningful involvement. This means holding events in locations accessible by public transportation, as well as providing interpretation services, food, and childcare.

Working with community organizations allows us to further connect with the community. We partner with the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition (DRCC) to involve the public in the cleanup process and address community concerns. We provide funding to DRCC through the [Public Participation Grant program](#).

See our [Lower Duwamish Waterway website](#) for more information.

Cleaning up 100 years of pollution in the Tacoma smelter plume

For almost 100 years, the Asarco Company operated a copper smelter in Tacoma. Air pollution from the smelter settled on the surface soil of more than [1,000 square miles](#) of the Puget Sound basin. Arsenic, lead, and other heavy metals are still in the soil as a result of this pollution. We started cleanup work in the area in 2006, and we continue to work with local communities to protect public and environmental health.

The communities affected by the Tacoma smelter plume are diverse. Our outreach and cleanup efforts are modified to meet the needs of the various communities.

We fund and work with local health departments through interagency agreements. The health departments in turn fund community projects and conduct targeted outreach. Our goal is to fund those closest to the work.

Some examples include:

- Public Health Seattle & King County works with local community grantees like Tilth Alliance to help get the information out to the communities

- Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department offers free soil sampling and offers a toolkit and resources to get free mulch to cover bare dirt; the program is specifically targeted to families with children

We created a [Dirt Alert map](#) to provide information on free soil sampling in the service area. The service area is a small area of the plume where arsenic concentrations are the highest. In this area, we operate the Yard Program and the Soil Safety Program. We offer free sampling and soil replacement to residential properties with the highest concentrations of arsenic and lead. The map makes it easy for anyone to find out if they live in the affected area, if their soil was replaced, or is eligible for cleanup.

We have conducted extensive outreach in the yard sampling service area. Our initial emphasis was on sampling soil at schools and childcare play areas through the Soil Safety Program. Our Healthy Action outreach materials are available in a variety of languages.

We work with businesses to help them voluntarily clean up their soil.

For more information, see our [Tacoma Smelter website](#).

Converting brownfields into affordable housing

For more than 30 years, we've been cleaning up contaminated properties — more than 7,000 completed cleanups so far. Removing toxic threats helps protect human health and the environment, and opens the door to put properties back into use. We're working to make it easier for affordable housing developers to redevelop once-contaminated properties into housing that communities can afford.

To learn more about our efforts, see our "[Affordable housing-related cleanup](#)" web page.

Prioritizing Volkswagen settlement funds

We're investing Volkswagen settlement and penalty funds in programs that are drastically reducing harmful emissions from transportation sources. We're prioritizing investments that maximize air pollution reductions and improve public health in communities that have historically borne a disproportionate share of the air pollution burden in Washington.

We worked with partners to use a variety of tools to identify and consider beneficial impacts of projects in these communities. See our "[Improving air quality & public health](#)" web page for more information.

Protecting communities from threats of climate change

Climate change poses a threat to Washington's snowpack, coastlines, forests, and agricultural economy. But climate change also adds to existing health disparities and increases the burdens on the state's most vulnerable and sensitive populations.

Extreme heat events and increasing air pollution mean increases in diseases like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and COPD, and it may mean that these diseases become more prevalent.

The impacts to vulnerable and sensitive populations of urban heat islands, food deserts, and homelessness will also be magnified by the effects of climate change.

Climate change worsens environmental injustice. The health concerns influenced by climate change are more acute for communities who already face disproportionate exposure to diesel emissions, toxic contamination, and other forms of pollution.

Other factors, like a person's age, language spoken, disability, and their access to affordable health care, technology, and the internet, may create barriers to receiving essential information and resources needed to protect health or ensure well-being for their families and communities.

Scientists and researchers at the Washington State Department of Health built a database of geographic, demographic, environmental, and health information to help understand health data and identify health disparities in Washington.

Ecology uses this powerful tool to develop criteria to evaluate potential investments from the \$140 million settlement the state received from the Volkswagen diesel cheating scandal. Using the database helps us direct funding for electric transit and school buses, cleaner diesel vehicles, and charging infrastructure for zero-emission vehicles toward projects that benefit communities disproportionately burdened with air pollution.

Related links

[Accessibility services](#)

[Recommendations for Prioritizing EJ in Washington State Government](#)  (pdf)

[EJSCREEN online mapping tool](#) (EPA) 

[Washington Tracking Network online environmental health mapping tool](#) (Dept of Health) 

[Environmental justice at EPA](#) 

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