

June 26th, 2024

Kaitlyn Kelly
Improving Air Quality in Overburdened Communities Grant Unit Supervisor
Air Quality Program
Washington Department of Ecology
Olympia, WA 98504-7600

Re: Improving Air Quality in Overburdened Communities Grants Public Comments

Dear Kaitlyn Kelly,

The Nature Conservancy in Washington (*TNC*) appreciates this opportunity to comment on the new Improving Air Quality in Overburdened Communities grant program. After meeting with the Department of Ecology grant team and participating in the public listening session on 6/10, we see two priority opportunities for improving the grant program design: Creating a grant funding distribution model that **funds community-based organizations upfront** for their work rather than through reimbursement, and ensuring **eligibility for community-based air quality monitoring** projects.

Grant funding distribution model

We would like to see a grant funding distribution model that enables at least some upfront fund distribution to community-based organizations rather than a reimbursement only model as is current practice. We are concerned restricting grant funding distribution to a reimbursement model would dissuade organizations from applying and put financial pressure on prospective community-based organization applicants in the 16 identified priority areas, especially for smaller and less resourced organizations. Establishing a grant program which provides funding in advance would be in line with the equity goals of the Climate Commitment Act (CCA) and the Healthy Environment for All Act (HEAL). Department of Ecology administrative guidelines do not explicitly mandate cost-reimbursement, and other states such as California and Oregon have implemented flexible grant distribution models showing great success in expanding the diversity of organizations applying and receiving grants.

- Lowering this funding barrier in a grant program funded by the CCA would be a clear way to ensure that the “CCA puts environmental justice and equity at the center of climate policy [by] making sure communities that bear the greatest burdens from air pollution today see cleaner, healthier air as the state cuts greenhouse gases”, as stated on the Department of Ecology’s website.
- The [16 overburdened communities](#) prioritized by the Department of Ecology in this grant program in addition to being highly impacted by criteria air pollution general share socioeconomic factors such as high rates of poverty and unemployment, and for the 9 communities in central/eastern Washington, geographic isolation that further limits the number, scale and capacity of community-based organizations serving those communities. Imposing a reimbursement-only funding model may result in limited funding being applied for and distributed to priority communities and those communities not receiving the resources necessary to reduce air pollution and realize co-benefits such as improved public health, community preparedness etc.
- Our proposed funding model is supported by numerous aspects of state law. The Department of Ecology is required to comply with the [Healthy Environment for All Act \(HEAL\)](#) that includes

guidance to incorporate environmental justice into budget processes and DOE has committed to “emphasize environmental justice in decision processes related to budget development, contracts, **grant and loan funding programs** and other expenditures where the agency has discretion, subject to legislative appropriations and state law.” [RCW 70A.02.080](#) concerning environmental justice obligations of agencies relating to budgets and funding further states “A covered agency may adopt rules or guidelines for criteria and procedures applicable to incorporating environmental justice principles in expenditure decisions, granting or withholding benefits and processes for budget development.”

- Further, the [Department of Ecology Administrative Requirements for Recipients of Ecology Grants and Loans \(Yellow Book\) July 2023](#) applies to agreements with a signature date on or after this version’s publication date of July 1, 2023 and does not contain language stating that cost-reimbursement is the only available option for grant funding distribution.
- As previously mentioned, California and Oregon have utilized flexible grant funding distribution models:
 - [California Air Resources Board \(CARB\) Community Air Grant Program](#) is funded by the state Cap-and-Trade auction proceeds and allows for both reimbursement and direct grant funding distribution. The advance payment (direct) option is provided with a purpose of assisting under resourced grantees – “*CARB in its sole discretion may provide advance payments of grant awards in a timely manner to support program initiation and implementation with a focus on mitigating the constraints of modest reserves and potential cash flow problems.*”
 - The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) has adopted flexible grant funding distribution to meet the needs of grantees. An [OHA memo](#) published in January 2024 states: “*for grants, OHA flexes the funding model to meet the needs of the grantee and the project. This can include upfront disbursement and pre-paid monthly or weekly models, with additional disbursements made based upon submission of progress reports (including spending). Many of OHA’s grants (350+) are pre-paid with monthly expenditure reports required from grantees. These grants do not use a reimbursement model due to delays and barriers in processing such requests.*”

Community air quality monitoring

We encourage Ecology to make community air quality monitoring projects eligible for consideration in this grant program while excluding local jurisdictions or other governmental agencies from this program unless partnering to support community-based organization(s), as other sources of funding are more readily accessible for more well-resourced governmental agencies. This enables addressing established gaps in existing air quality monitoring networks and the provisions in the Climate Commitment Act specifically calling for strengthening of air quality monitoring in overburdened communities, while directly supporting community-led science and project development. While the Department of Ecology has been funded to expand their own monitoring network, there is well established benefit of community air quality monitoring programs and precedent for funding community air monitoring efforts at the federal and state levels. There are multiple reasons to move forward with this recommendation:

- The [Climate Commitment Act](#) contains several direct provisions regarding air monitoring for criteria pollutants. These call for deploying an air monitoring network in overburdened communities (section 3), strengthening air quality monitoring to measure, track and better understand air pollution levels (section 29), improving air quality through the reduction of criteria pollutants, including **through effective air quality monitoring** (section 31)

- [RCW 70A.02.080](#) directs covered agencies including the Department of Ecology to “consider a broad scope of grants and contracting opportunities that effectuate environmental justice principles including **community grants to monitor pollution.**”
- Existing air quality monitoring systems managed by federal, state and local agencies are outdated, do not monitor for small particle pollution in many U.S. counties with small populations with [documented failures](#) to detect dangerous levels of airborne toxics and alert the public. The Congressional Budget Office completed an [evaluation of the national air quality monitoring system](#) in 2020 that included interviews with EPA officials, state and local air quality managers on gaps in the current system and strategies for improvement. The CBO evaluation yielded two primary needs: 1: additional information on air toxics to understand health risks and **2: how to use low-cost sensors to provide real-time, local-scale air quality information - such as the type of sensor and hyperlocal air quality information that has been funded through the CARB Community Air Grant Program.**
- The benefits of community air quality monitoring include providing hyperlocal data, strengthening local air quality and health impact alert systems, improving public awareness and engagement are well established and increasingly supported by federal and state grant programs:
 - The [CARB Community Air Protection Community Air Grants](#) program has distributed \$35 million since 2018 to 69 local organizations and 8 California Native American Tribes. The program allows funding to support community air quality monitoring projects and over 50% of the [42 projects](#) awarded funding in the most recent 2023 grant cycle were related to [air quality monitoring](#).
 - The [Environmental Protection Agency distributed \\$53 million](#) through the Inflation Reduction Act to 132 air monitoring projects across 37 states focused on overburdened communities in 2022.

Thank you for considering our feedback.

Sincerely,

Jamie Stroble
Director of Climate Action & Resilience
The Nature Conservancy of Washington