

Here's What We Lose If We Gut The EPA's Environmental Justice Work

Dismantling the EPA program, advocates say, could be devastating to low-income communities of color.

By Joseph Erbentraut

With the abrupt resignation of its leader, the fate of the Environmental Protection Agency's [environmental justice program](#) appears to be practically sealed.

On Thursday, InsideClimate News reported that Mustafa Ali, who has been heading the EPA's environmental justice work and helped found the program in 1992, had [resigned from his post](#).

Ali told the site in an interview that he sees the work he was part of as critical to the EPA's overall function, but indicated that he doesn't believe the agency's current leaders share that belief.

"My values and priorities seem to be different than our current leadership and because of that I feel that it's best if I take my talents elsewhere," Ali said.

The program, which helps disadvantaged communities push back against industry pollution, appears bound for a drastic, [78-percent funding cut](#) according to preliminary Office of Management and Budget numbers reported by The Oregonian and confirmed by other media outlets last week. The cuts would essentially gut the program, reducing its funding from \$6.7 million to just \$1.5 million.

In his resignation letter, [shared widely](#) across Twitter on Thursday, Ali pleaded with EPA chief [Scott Pruitt](#) to continue to support the office. Ali credited it with bringing together community groups, government and industry interests “to find collaborative solutions to many of the country’s most serious environmental and public health issues and concerns” in more than 1,000 communities over the course of his time there.

“I strongly encourage you and your team to continue promoting agency efforts to validate these communities’ concerns, and value their lives,” Ali wrote in the letter.

EPA officials did not respond to a request for comment on Ali’s resignation, but Lisa Garcia, who previously [headed up](#) the agency’s environmental justice work, said she was “outraged” by the news.

“I think this shows that this administration has no idea how valuable the office of environmental justice is,” Garcia, who left the EPA in 2014 to work at [Earthjustice](#), a nonprofit environmental advocacy group, told The Huffington Post.

The program has operated for years with a shoe-string staff and a tiny budget — just 0.08 percent of the agency’s \$8 billion budget, which itself represented just [0.22 percent](#) of federal spending last year.

So, Garcia added, if the agency is going to be tasked with doing more with less, the environmental justice program should be emulated — not eliminated.

“This decision shows how fiscally irresponsible they are and how they are absolutely making uneducated decisions,” Garcia said. “They aren’t looking at the facts and they really don’t care about people because this is the one program that focuses on some of the most vulnerable communities. It smacks of elitism and racism if this is where they think the cuts can come from.”



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The lead crisis in Flint, Michigan, has raised the profile of environmental justice issues. The EPA is now preparing to gut its environmental justice program.

The EPA's environmental justice program, which was originally called the environmental equity office, was [established in 1992](#) following the release of a series of [damning reports](#) that found industry polluters like toxic waste sites were disproportionately located in low-income communities of color when compared to wealthier, whiter neighborhoods.

The program aimed to address the problem of minority and low-income communities' heightened exposure to these pollutants, providing small grants to help communities both create and implement local solutions to environmental justice concerns where they live.

It's had [many achievements](#). In just one example, a community organization in Spartanburg, South Carolina, helped a neighborhood surrounded by [Superfund sites](#) and [Brownfields](#) leverage a \$20,000 EPA grant into cleanup efforts that led to more than [\\$270 million in investments](#) like community health centers, affordable housing, a recreation center, gardens and green space.

In a 2015 agency blog post, former EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy called the Spartanburg effort "[a shining beacon](#) of what's possible when folks impacted by community decisions have a seat at the table."

Garcia cited other examples of the program's success: A small EPA environmental justice grant helped the residents of Tonawanda, New York, study the level of toxic benzene in their air — information that they used to force an industry polluter to cut its emissions, resulting in [improved air quality](#). Another similar grant helped Asian-American groups in Seattle develop stormwater retention solutions that helped them revitalize the city's Chinatown district with [urban gardens](#).

Improvements like these don't appear to be a priority for the EPA under the [Trump](#) administration. Though Pruitt has commented in recent interviews that he will [push back](#) against certain agency cuts proposed by the OMB, he has not named environmental justice among them.

This would provide a stark contrast to the way in which environmental justice was prioritized at the EPA under the Obama administration, most plainly evidenced by the long-term goals set forth in the [Plan EJ 2014](#) and [2020 EJ Action Agenda](#) reports that mapped out a comprehensive, agency-wide environmental justice strategy.

The EPA clearly has a long way to go in that regard. A report [released last year](#) by the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights found that the agency has a long track record of extremely delayed responses to environmental justice concerns. A separate report from the Center for Public Integrity found that the agency has been "[chronically unresponsive](#)" to such complaints.

"This decision shows how fiscally irresponsible they are and how they are absolutely making uneducated decisions."Lisa Garcia, former head of the EPA's environmental justice program

Despite the previous administration's mixed record on environmental justice, advocates fear that the program's gutting will cause the agency to backtrack on the progress that has been made at a time when situations like the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, have shown how high the stakes in these matters can be.

Still, the cuts did not come as a surprise to some environmental justice advocates like Kay Cuajunco, a spokeswoman for the [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#).

“We knew that environmental justice communities — low-income communities and communities of color — would be the first and worst hit under the new administration,” Cuajunco told HuffPost. “They have always been disproportionately impacted by pollution, and now the scale of attack will be bigger and the few backstops we’ve had will be gone.”

Other advocates are already preparing to push back against the cuts. And it starts with holding Pruitt to remarks he made during his Senate confirmation process, according to Michele Roberts, national co-coordinator of the [Environmental Justice Health Alliance](#) nonprofit.

In response to questions from Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), Roberts noted, Pruitt [indicated](#) that he recognized the importance of environmental justice efforts and planned to “protect human health and the environment for all Americans.”

“We would think that whatever these programmatic changes he’s proposing would uphold the words that he listed off that he would honor during his hearing,” Roberts told HuffPost. “If he’s committed to all those things, the environmental justice program is not on the chopping block. But I’m just using his words.”

The OMB’s proposed cuts to the EPA total [about 25 percent](#) of its overall budget and would eliminate 1 in 5 of the agency’s employees. Some programs — like beach water quality state grants and [Great Lakes](#), Chesapeake Bay and Puget Sound restoration efforts— are essentially eliminated in the proposal, while climate and Brownfield programs are also slated for major cuts.

Many of these cuts beyond the environmental justice program would also disproportionately impact lower-income communities and communities of color, environmental groups have noted.

“While this ‘zero out’ strategy would impact nearly every community in the United States, a close examination shows the burden of these cuts will fall hardest on the health of low-income Americans and people of color,” Travis Nichols, [Greenpeace USA](#) spokesman, said in a previous statement. “This is environmental racism in action.”