

Department of Environmental Management

Environmental Justice Policy

Version 1.4-September 28, 2023

Serving Our Communities | Protecting Our Environment | Connecting Our People

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (hereinafter “DEM” or “Department”) has developed this environmental justice (hereinafter “EJ”) policy to guide all programs within the Department. This EJ policy has been created by DEM to represent the Department’s commitment to the inclusion of equity and justice within all programs. This document will be dynamic, evolving based on feedback from our local community groups, businesses, elected officials, faith communities, and our communities of color - including individuals who identify as Black, Latino, Indigenous and Native American, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander. Communities of Rhode Island with environmental justice concerns face entrenched disparities that are often the legacy of racial discrimination and segregation, redlining, exclusionary zoning, and other discriminatory land use decisions. These decisions have included the placement of polluting industries and contaminated sites in locations that cause negative impacts to the public health of these communities. These remnants of discrimination persist to this day. People in these communities suffer from poorer health outcomes and have lower life expectancies than those in other communities in our State¹. This policy represents DEM’s ongoing commitment and dedication to a clean, healthy Ocean State and represents DEM’s commitment to the health of all people who live and work within its communities, especially for those who often experience the disproportionate and adverse human health impacts of environmental burdens.

Definitions

"Environmental Justice (EJ)" means the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, Tribal affiliation, disability, English language proficiency,

¹ RIDOH in 2020: [Rhode Island’s Healthy Equity Measures](#). See measures for Social Vulnerability, Natural Environment, Environmental Hazards.

or income with respect to access to the state's natural resources and the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies;

“Fair Treatment” means no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental, and commercial operations or policies, and should have equal access and opportunity to enjoy clean air; clean water; safe and healthy foods; and an environment that is healthy, sustainable, climate-resilient, and free from levels of harmful pollution and chemical exposure.

“Meaningful Involvement” means engagement and collaboration to address the adverse conditions caused by harmful environmental impact. Meaningful involvement provides individuals an opportunity to participate in decisions toward investments of culturally vibrant, sustainable, and resilient communities which affect an individual's environment and/or health. Prioritizing community concerns is a necessity to ensure the building of an equitable, inclusive, and sustainable Rhode Island that offers economic opportunities, workforce training, and high-quality and well-paying jobs.

“Environmental Justice Focus Area” is a census tract that meets one or more of the following criteria:

- (i) Annual median household income is not more than sixty-five percent (65%) of the statewide annual median household income;
- (ii) Minority population is equal to or greater than forty percent (40%) of the population;
- (iii) Twenty-five percent (25%) or more of the households lack English language proficiency;
or
- (iv) Minorities comprise twenty-five percent (25%) or more of the population and the annual median household income of the municipality in the proposed area does not exceed one hundred fifty percent (150%) of the statewide annual median household income.

Protecting Our Environment

All persons who live and work in Rhode Island, regardless of income, race, ethnicity, or national origin, have a right to live in a clean and healthy environment. DEM strongly believes that no community should be burdened with adverse environmental and public health consequences. As a result of Rhode Island's industrial history and heritage, many communities in the state are disproportionately impacted by environmental and public health risks. Many of Rhode Island's EJ focus areas are particularly afflicted by pollution from numerous industrial, commercial, and governmental facilities located in their neighborhoods. The negative impacts created by exposure to environmental burdens - including inequitable access to clean water, clean air, natural places, and resources for other basic human health- as well as proximity to pollution, contaminated sites, toxic exposures, and other environmental stressors, further disadvantage communities with environmental justice concerns. Additionally, these same communities often have not had opportunities for equitable access to the State's open spaces to use, recreate, and enjoy. Communities in many of these EJ focus areas have suffered from an increase in adverse health effects, such as asthma, cancer, and increased exposure to hazardous substances, among other issues. It is DEM's responsibility and in the interest of its people to implement State law and regulation to limit and eliminate harmful pollutants which are often disproportionately found in and around facilities located near overburdened communities and to provide these communities equal opportunity to recreate and enjoy in the state's natural places, which also has known health benefits.

Supporting and Serving Environmental Justice Communities

DEM, through this EJ policy, intends to use data, resources, and information to provide ample opportunity for members in environmental justice focus areas to influence policy that will advance environmental justice for all by implementing and enforcing environmental laws and regulations, preventing pollution, addressing climate change and its effects, and working to clean up legacy pollution that is harming human health and the environment. A key element of supporting and serving communities is building capacity and supporting efforts for all communities to have

meaningful involvement, providing people with a sense of collective ownership through recognition of community autonomy, and effectively participate in conversations and decisions about environmental issues of interest. These issues are wide ranging in nature and should be thought of to include access to the state's abundance of natural resources, not just protection from environmental harms. This will assist in problem solving and improve the natural and economic conditions across all of Rhode Island's neighborhoods. Generally, the idea of serving community is synonymous with the idea of effectively engaging with community groups to improve and rebuild the quality of life of overburdened neighborhoods. Not one organization or group is able to do this alone, rather it takes the strength and the will of those who live in those respective communities working with organizations and agencies, including DEM.

For the benefit of all Rhode Island communities and their people, DEM will seek to create and build partnerships to help shape, promote, and deliver key environmental services and provide opportunities for people in EJ focus areas to actively take part in shaping the economic, physical, and environmental future of their communities. Building these partnerships is essential to successfully promote environmental health, community health, and individual health. With effective collaboration between DEM staff members, relevant state officials, partner academic institutions, community-based organizations, and community stakeholders, the Department will seek out and support important opportunities for multi-directional learning and lessen the existing informational disparities between DEM and identified overburdened communities. DEM will take further steps wherever possible to dismantle racial discrimination and institutional bias that disproportionately affect the health, environment, safety, and resiliency of communities with environmental justice concerns, using the tools available to the Department.

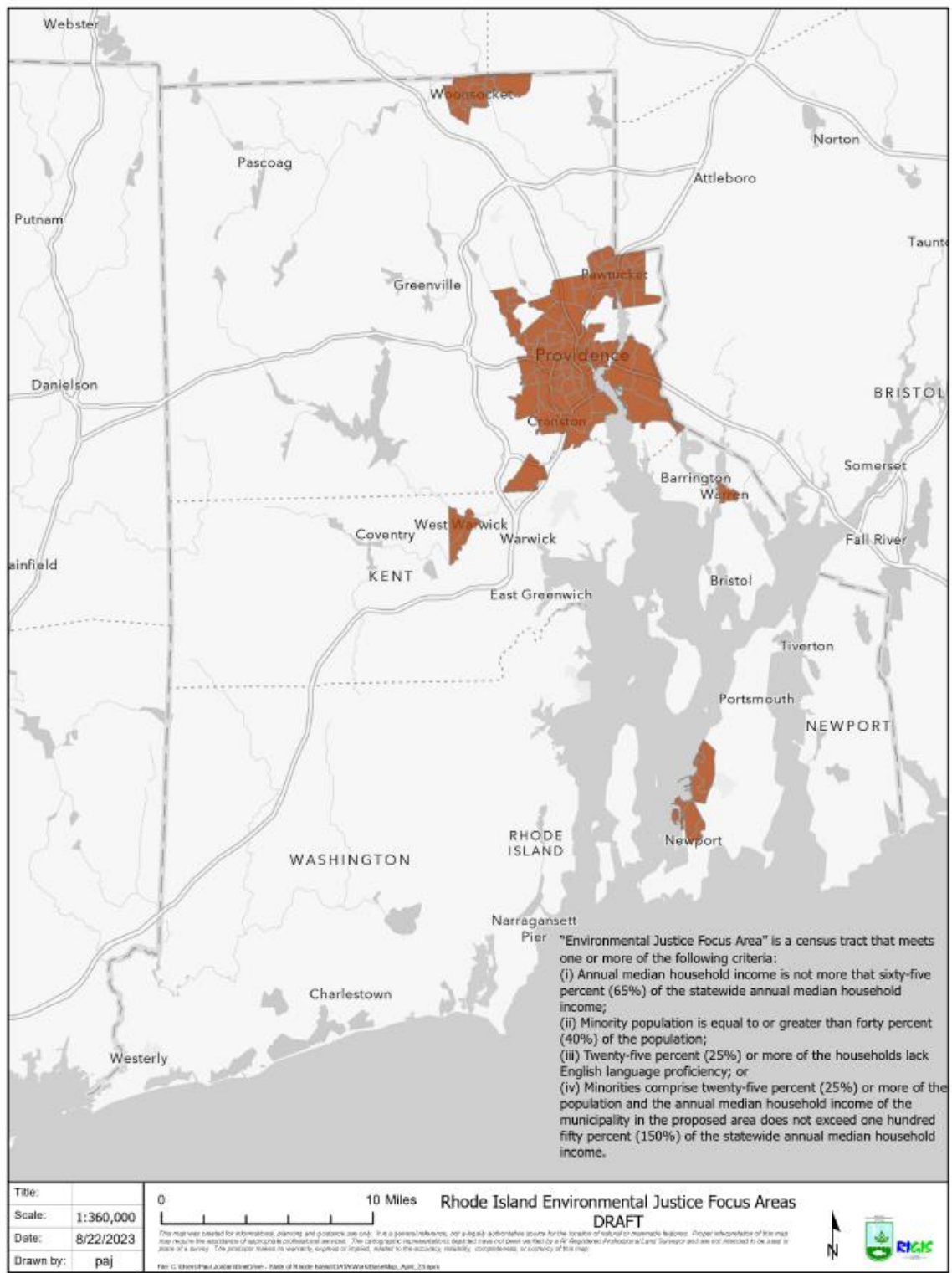
The most effective partnerships with DEM are designed to strengthen existing and future relationships and create alliances to make environmental justice a reality for the Ocean State. To this end, DEM will collaborate with environmental and community-based organizations across the state with the broad goal of achieving clean air, land, environment, and healthy, sustainable communities for all Rhode Islanders.

DEM Commitment Statement

DEM is committed to protecting, restoring, managing, and promoting Rhode Island's environment and natural resources to preserve and improve the quality of life of all its people. In doing so, DEM's ongoing obligation is to incorporate EJ considerations into all the Department's programs, policies, and activities, and elevate important environmental issues that have a significant impact on EJ focus areas. DEM will work with local government and community partners to assist with ongoing efforts towards diversifying DEM's workforce by identifying top talent, permanent and summer job placement, and internship opportunities. Taking these important and intentional steps will support DEM's commitment to strengthen the Department and better serve and reflect the needs of communities.

DEM will continue to monitor, adjust, and improve the effectiveness of this environmental justice framework as it is implemented. This is an evolving policy and changes will be made to ensure consistency and effectiveness with the stated goals across the Department.

Striving to address inequities in EJ focus areas across Rhode Island is a necessary and long-term effort that can only be achieved through the implementation of measurable goals and meaningful community involvement. This policy will guide development of strategies to integrate environmental justice principles into DEM's daily practices. As the [DEM Strategic Plan \[link\]](#) is updated, and program work plans are developed, the commitments identified in this policy will be put into action across the Department.



Rhode Island identified "Environmental Justice Focus Areas" as census tracts that meets one or more of the stated criteria. Developed by Paul Jordan