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A just future for all Oregonians

Lisa Arkin and Eric Richardson Guest View

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Oregon may soon lead the nation in adopting a common understanding of environmental justice that is of utmost importance to correcting historical unfairness in environmental protection policies.

On March 23, the Senate Committee on Energy and Environment, chaired by Springfield's State Sen. Lee Beyer, unanimously voted in favor of adopting Senate Concurrent Resolution 17, an environmental justice framework for Oregon. SCR 17 is a set of shared values to create a civil and just society, one that reflects our collective effort to allow people to have a high quality of life, happiness, opportunity and productivity. The vote of the Senate committee lends support and credence to the environmental justice work many underrepresented communities want to see implemented.

Throughout modern history, resolutions have spelled out the obligation to take special care to uplift the conditions of those less fortunate who have faced disproportionate burdens and harms. SCR 17 is Oregon's opportunity to be on the right side of history, much in the same way as the United Nations General Assembly when representatives joined together to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to call out the atrocities and genocide of World War II and set a universal standard of fundamental human rights.

Four decades after the Declaration of Human Rights, the environmental justice movement attracted serious attention when data confirmed the heavier burden of environmental and health struggles communities of color have battled for centuries. This movement — led by Black, Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islander, Tribal and Indigenous communities — grew in opposition to inequitable exposures to siting of our country's most undesirable pollution makers: hazardous waste sites, coal-fired power plants, pesticide and chemical manufacturers, garbage dumps and the like. In response to these blatant inequities, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit drafted and adopted the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice. These principles have since served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement of environmental justice.

Three decades after the 17 principles were adopted, we are faced with a new existential threat: the climate crisis. Once again, the data overwhelmingly proves that, while climate change will affect everyone, communities historically and presently experiencing the brunt of health, economic and ecological impacts will be impacted more than others.

It's been 70 years since the first human rights declaration, and we must continue to do the work of justice. The year 2021 is Oregon's time to fully address the consequences of environmental racism within our communities and work to alleviate the impacts of climate change on our most vulnerable populations. Once SCR 17 is passed by the full complement of legislators in the Senate and the House, this Environmental Justice Framework will ensure that Oregon's environmental and climate solutions address structural socioeconomic inequalities built by a history of economic and social inequality, whether intentional or unintentional.

The immense value of adopting an Environmental Justice Framework was described to the senators in testimony provided by two of Oregon's most prominent environmental justice leaders, Robin Morris Collin and Robert Collin. They wrote, "Any truly reparative and restorative action must acknowledge the consequences of racism on all of our communities, even as we develop policies and plans to remedy climate change, fire suppression, water distribution and public health."

The principles of SCR 17, the Environmental Justice Framework Resolution, are true to Oregon's experience and our nation's experience. Recently, a committee of Oregon decision makers took a bold step to amplify the voices and needs of those people who have long been underserved and overburdened and to declare our collective responsibility to build a more just and sustainable future.

We look to all our leaders to join them and help Oregon take its place in a long legacy of declarations that propel humans toward a just community.

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