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Environmental justice on the floor of Legislature

Robert W. Collin Guest Opinion

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Oregon has led the states – often without acknowledgment – in developing locally authentic ways to address environmental justice in the work of our state natural resource agencies.

I am a founding volunteer appointment of the Environmental Justice Task Force and now serve as its current vice-chair. In its 11 years, Oregon has invested its time in listening to communities across Oregon and bringing Oregon's natural resource agencies to these communities to connect them in an atmosphere of accountability and collaboration. The Environmental Justice Task Force helped prepare our natural resource agencies for collaborative community engagement, a fundamental requirement for climate policy.

Two bills under consideration in the Legislature are landmarks of environmental leadership and leadership for climate justice. Senate Concurrent Resolution 17 and HB 2488 are pathbreaking legislation embracing environmental justice and adapting land-use goals to the urgent needs of climate change.

We must acknowledge that climate policies are starting from a point of structural injustice reflected in the places and people disproportionately impacted, especially for Black, indigenous and communities of color, low-income communities and rural communities. Why not?

Climate change policy must acknowledge that this history has contemporary consequences for people the land, air and water.

It is more than a moral decision or aspirational goal. The cost of exclusion of vulnerable, disproportionately impacted people is a delay in systemic approaches to climate policy. The accumulated environmental impacts continue to build over time raising health and environmental risks to historic proportions. Climate changes cast a cloud of potentially harmful risks to the vulnerable and nonvulnerable alike. It can expand vulnerability to risks, like the fires of last year did. We all breathed the air, we all drank the water, and we all lived

on the land in and around fires. We were vulnerable. The biggest impact of climate changes on our present quality of life is the uncertainty of the future for everyone.

Senate Concurrent Resolution 17 frames principles of environmental justice to guide our Climate policy development. The principles of SCR 17 are Oregon principles of environmental justice echo those heard in all our community meetings and are designed to listen to environmental justice issues of vulnerable communities in Oregon.

SCR 17 recognizes a legitimate public purpose of achieving racial justice in our public places and public policies as a fundamental part of all climate policy. Recognition of this public purpose is essential to our common future. House Bill 2488, another environmental justice community-initiated bill, is to add climate justice and greenhouse gas as a land-use planning goal. Why not?

Our state senators should adopt these principles now, or, at much greater financial, social and ecosystems cost, later. The dynamic statement of SCR 17 principals can inform their earnest and hardworking efforts as they struggle with climate policy, as we all are. And like any good roadmap, points us in the right direction.

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