Community-based Organizations and Scientists Collaborate on Solutions to Health Disparities

Washington State-based researchers co-author report in Science regarding major Biden Administration environmental justice initiative

Researchers from academic institutions, WE ACT (a national environmental justice organization), and the Front and Centered coalition in Washington State have published their latest findings on environmental health disparities in the July 21 issue of the premier research journal Science. Titled “Air Quality Policy Should Quantify Effects on Disparities,” the paper verifies concerns that the Biden Administration’s Climate and Environmental Justice Screening Tool, or CEJST, does not sufficiently address racial disparities in exposure to air pollution. The paper reveals that if past trends in emission reductions were to continue into the future, racial-ethnic disparities in exposure would persist even as air pollution concentrations decrease. The research also highlights the need for decision makers to examine the equity implications of regulations and future policies if they want to meet environmental justice goals.

Besides building power within our coalition membership and advocating for statewide policy change, Front and Centered also plays an active role in research and development initiatives that inform and advance the environmental and climate justice movement in Washington State. The Washington Environmental Health Disparities Map, or EHD Map, is one such initiative that visualizes cumulative environmental injustices across the state. The EHD Map remains the best available tool for assessing cumulative impacts of pollution burden, vulnerabilities, and health disparities statewide.

“Our latest research highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of disparities to create effective policy,” said Dr. Esther Min, Director of Environmental Health Research and Partnerships for Front and Centered. “Better policy solutions are possible when policies and research make space for the many experiences, knowledges, and critical analyses of frontline communities.”

The White House’s Justice40 Initiative has been using the CEJST to identify disadvantaged communities based on climate, environmental, and other burdens, and to target those communities for government programs. But the researchers’ air pollution projection models, which examined future community investment scenarios informed by the CEJST, showed that disparities in air pollution were
not addressed and in some cases even made worse. While application of the CEJST to guide air pollution emission reductions may reduce exposure disparities between low-income versus higher-income households and between CEJST-defined disadvantaged versus non-disadvantaged communities, this approach will not ameliorate exposure disparities by race and ethnicity.

“We were surprised by these findings,” said Julian Marshall, corresponding author and a Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at University of Washington. “CEJST involves reducing emissions in disadvantaged communities, which is important for addressing exposure disparities, so we expected the CEJST approach would lead to bigger benefits than what we found.” He added, “Our work shows that it’s time we start tracking impacts of proposed policies on exposure disparities, and chart a path to eliminating them.”

*Front and Centered is a diverse and powerful coalition of communities of color-led groups across Washington State that come together around a vision of a Just Transition through the building of power in communities hit first and worst by climate impacts and environmental harm. We are the only statewide organization that brings together a broad, multiracial coalition to support and build a more environmentally just future for frontline communities, and in doing so, a better future for all.*

**Media Contacts:**

Charlie McAteer, **Front and Centered**, 917-696-1321, charlie@frontandcentered.org
James Urton, **University of Washington**, 206-543-2583, jurton@uw.edu
Jama Joseph, **WE ACT for Environmental Justice**, 646-951-1648, jama.joseph@weact.org
Kara Manke, **University of California, Berkeley**, 510-847-4891, kjmanke@berkeley.edu

###