

Environmental Justice

In My Community



What is Environmental Justice?

Environmental Justice (EJ) is based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental pollution and to live in and enjoy a clean and healthful environment.

What is an example of EJ?

According to the EPA, “one of the most appalling environmental tragedies in American history” was the Love Canal disaster in Niagara Falls, New York. Hazardous materials, waste, and land mismanagement in the area impacted the health of more than 6,000 residents. For over 30 years, the canal was a dump site for a chemical company. Not long after the company was sold to the city, officials began to build schools, homes and low-income housing on the former landfill. In the years following, wet winters and springs caused the water table to rise and toxins to seep in residents’ backyards. As a result of the groundwater contamination, early surveys conducted by residents illustrated that 56 percent of the children born in the neighborhood had birth defects such as deformed teeth, anemia, ADHD and auto immune diseases, while mothers had a 300 percent jump in miscarriages.

How can communities affected by EJ issues deal with environmental issues?

It is important that the community stays informed about the environmental issues, participates in the policy-making process and utilizes resources available from government and private entities in order to ensure a safe, healthy and sustainable community for all.

Local government land use decisions: In Maryland, counties have authority over local zoning of most projects that affect the environmental health of your community. For example, county zoning laws define land for residential, commercial, or industrial uses. These zoning laws can lead to many “dirty” industries being congregated together in one area. This can lead to increased pollution for your community.

What actions can I take?

- You can stay informed by monitoring your local government’s planning and zoning website for projects that affect you and your community.
- Newspapers and social media can also be an effective tool for keeping up-to-date on what’s happening in your community.
- Check if your county has an email service to send you updates on projects in your area.
- Your county posts a schedule of public meetings on its website, attend the public meetings for projects in your area and provide comments.

State permitting decisions: Industries that operate in Maryland have to follow state environmental laws and regulations. These industries require a permit from the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE). For example, MDE issues an air quality permit for construction of certain projects.

What actions can I take?

- You can stay informed by visiting MDE's website. For general information visit: <http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/marylander/Pages/MarylanderHome.aspx>
- To track proposed projects that are coming to your neighborhood visit: <http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/Permits/sb47/Pages/SB47.aspx>
- Certain air quality control permits to construct are subject to public review. Community associations, elected officials and interested persons can request an information meeting or public hearing. MDE requires the industry applicant to publish a notice regarding the application. The public can request an information meeting within 10 days of the notice.
- For more information visit: http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/Marylander/CitizenParticipation/Pages/CitizensInfoCenter/citizen_participation/publicmeetingguide.aspx

Implementation of Environmental Justice in Maryland

MDE's mission in regard to Environmental Justice is to emphasize improvements in quality of life, economic development, and environmental protection for all communities. Implementation efforts of Environmental Justice at the Maryland Department of Environment include:

Proactive Engagement

- Integrate and incorporate EJ ideals into state environmental policy in order to protect all communities.
- Continue education of state regulators on environmental justice and sustainable communities, with specialized focus given to disenfranchised communities.
- Strengthen government infrastructure at local levels to support marginalized communities.

Recognize Environmental Justice concerns with collaborative approaches

- Build a network of people who are knowledgeable about EJ that can share expertise and advance the EJ agenda in Maryland. This includes reaching out to local businesses, legislators, planning and community organizations, and the academic community.
- Use this network when working to find mutually beneficial solutions for communities and regulated facilities.
- Work with the Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities (CEJSC).

Offer solutions

- Optimize state resources. Solutions could appear in the form of increased public participation and education, public-private partnerships, innovative outreach advertising (social media, newspapers, press releases, outdoor signs), and strategic enforcement.

Maryland Environmental Justice Resources

The Commission of Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities:

http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/CrossMedia/EnvironmentalJustice/EJImplementationinMaryland/Pages/programs/multimediaprograms/environmental_justice/implementation/details.aspx

The Maryland Department of the Environment:

<http://www.mde.state.md.us/programs/CrossMedia/EnvironmentalJustice>

**For more information contact Lisa Nissley, Environmental Justice Coordinator
at lisa.nissley@maryland.gov**

