



OPAL
Environmental Justice Oregon

opalpdx.org

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OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon Executive Director Huy Ong's testimony as prepared:

Thank you Representative Jessica Vega Pederson for providing an opportunity to comment on such an important on-going issue.

Hello, my name is Huy Ong, a long-time resident of Portland, an alumni of Cleveland High School and I am the Executive Director of OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon. OPAL stands for Organizing People, Activating Leaders. We're a grassroots community organizing group that builds power for environmental justice and civil rights among communities of color and people with low incomes. OPAL emerged from decades of community organizing in response to air toxics and our exposure to other pollutants. Portland has a long history of community resistance to environmental racism and classism. It is important for all of us to recognize those that have come before this crisis and those that will remain when the cameras are turned off. Time and again, we experience a sudden surge in awareness of these issues, as now during this discussion of arsenic and cadmium from glass manufacturing, and time and again, very little is done to resolve them.

Our people are often excluded from conversations about the urban environment – the spaces where we live, work, learn, pray and play. Uplifting community voices - past, present and future - is why I am here to speak with you. Teresa Keishi-Soto, who couldn't be here today, is one of the core members of Bus Riders Unite, Portland's transit riders union. A woman of color, in her late 60's, Teresa is continuing her education. Processes like this are often inaccessible to low-income people of color, seniors, and students – held early in the morning, an hour away from where we live.

In 2003, Teresa's apartment complex on 125th and Foster Rd., experienced air quality issues from auto emissions and industrial pollution. The smells were putrid. She could no longer sleep in her own bedroom. The toxic air affected her lungs, such that she could not walk to the bus without coughing up phlegm and having difficulty breathing. In 2004 the air quality monitor at 122nd and Powell was removed, after consistently registering the worst air quality in the region. Today, Teresa is still living in the same apartment complex, and the quality of the air hasn't improved. She's been breathing foul air for over a decade.

This is not for a lack of advocacy around air toxics. Despite decades of outcry from across our region, polluters have managed to prevent meaningful action. Industries must be held accountable for releasing air toxics. Mobile emissions must be reduced and mitigated. Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and other jurisdictions have done very little to protect our communities, and all residents of Portland suffer for it – particularly low income people and people of color, who experience disproportionate exposure as well as higher rates of asthma and low birth-weight, to name just two. DEQ is inconsistent or failing in its duties - the law gives them the authority to act, but they refuse. DEQ receives funding in part by selling pollution permits, which represents a clear conflict of interest: every new polluter is a new source of revenue. DEQ doesn't assess health impacts when issuing pollution

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and Civil Rights in Our Communities**



permits, a clear abdication of duty. DEQ doesn't consider construction a source of emissions, despite obvious air quality impacts. DEQ fails to meaningfully regulate highly-dangerous diesel particulate matter. DEQ collects data, but fails to distribute, interpret or apply that data for meaningful public benefit. For decades, DEQ has failed to heed the demands of low income people and people of color. Teresa couldn't be here today, but she is here in spirit, with all these powerful advocates who have been working on these issues tirelessly, not just since the Bullseye news broke, but for decades.

These are the longstanding demands of Portland's environmental justice communities:

- We demand that you let us lead to address the unequal burden of toxic air we face.
- We demand that DEQ's responsiveness to community concerns be a primary consideration in the retention of DEQ's leadership.
- We demand that DEQ strengthen its connection to our most-impacted communities through authentic, resourced engagement of people of color and low income, in our communities.
- We demand that the DEQ reports on emissions plaguing us, in a way that we can understand, to inform us as we lead.
- We demand DEQ regularly release comprehensive data revealing the total, cumulative impact of emissions in our neighborhoods, rather than just individual source reports.
- We demand DEQ considers the public health impact of issuing polluting permits.
- We demand that polluters are no longer taken at their word when they report on their own emissions – because they are often not truthful. DEQ and other agencies should take an active role in assessing the truth on behalf of the public interest.
- We demand that testing for impacted communities – body, air, water and soil – be provided at the expense of polluters. Polluters must also bear the costs of repairing any damage that is discovered, and pay for damages to life and property.

The status quo is environmental racism. A failure to improve and employ DEQ's regulatory process in these ways is a failure to listen to the voices of the most-impacted people in our communities: people like Teresa and the people in this room. The lack of leadership on this issue is unacceptable. OPAL stands in solidarity with impacted communities across the region, whose lives are at stake in this discussion. OPAL, Bus Riders Unite, the Youth Environmental Justice Alliance, and our allies will be engaging our members and communities on this issue. Act in a way that helps us breathe easier. Progress can be achieved - we simply ask you to champion our cause in the face of industry and bureaucratic pushback. Thank you for hearing us and look forward to ongoing opportunities to engage moving forward.