

TO: Senate Committee on Energy and Environment

FROM: Quinn Read

DATE: February 9, 2021

RE: Testimony in Support of SB 286 – Relating to the Environmental Justice Task Force

My name is Quinn Read, and I am a member of the Environmental Justice Task Force (EJTF) and the Environmental Equity Committee of the Governor’s Racial Justice Council. I am also the Oregon Policy Director for the Center for Biological Diversity. I respectfully submit the following comments in support of SB 286. This bill makes a number of important changes to the structure and scope of the EJTF to help ensure that all Oregonians – regardless of race, ethnicity, language, income, or other demographic factors – have the right to live, learn, work, and play in a clean, safe, and healthy environment.

I believe SB 286 provides a timely and necessary commitment to environmental justice in Oregon. It does this by establishing clear priorities for the EJTF’s work to advance environmental justice and giving it the foundation to do so successfully. First, the bill renames and reorganizes the EJTF as the Environmental Justice Council within the Department of Environmental Quality to help ensure adequate funding and staffing resources. The bill also requires the development of an analysis to identify our most environmentally vulnerable populations and preparation of an accompanying report with guidelines and recommendations. Finally, the bill requires natural resources agencies to use the analysis when developing administrative rules or agency policies or programs.

Environmental equity was identified as one of the priorities for the Governor’s Racial Justice Council. Why? Because our system has created a dynamic in which vulnerable communities – particularly communities of color and low-income communities – bear greater risk from environmental hazards and have less access to environmental benefits.

Over the last several months, the Environmental Equity Committee has met regularly to discuss and propose solutions to a wide range of issues – from creating an environmental vulnerability analysis to ensuring clean water for all to increasing access to the outdoors. One recurring theme in all of our discussions was the important role of the EJTF in advising state agencies as they implemented all of these policy solutions.

As a task force member, I was excited about the opportunity to help support so many environmental justice policies. However, my priority is to set up the task force for success so it can continue to serve the public, state agencies, and the Governor. I was deeply concerned about adding more responsibilities without more resources. That's why I'm so encouraged by this bill. I believe it establishes a strong foundation for the task force and its next stage of critical environmental justice work in Oregon.

The task force was established in 2010, and over the last ten years it has developed wonderful collaborative relationships with staff from Oregon's natural resources agencies, provided guidance and recommendations on agency rulemakings, programs, and public processes, and served as a public forum for environmental justice communities. A task force is by its very nature a temporary body designed to address a single issue. But there's nothing temporary about Oregon's commitment to environmental justice. Nor is environmental justice a "single issue" topic. It's nuanced and complex and requires a significant investment of time and energy.

In recent years, public awareness of environmental injustice and inequity in Oregon has increased. So too has demand for the services and expertise of the task force. The task force is made up of volunteers like me who are there because we are personally invested in environmental justice. The task force has used its limited resources very efficiently, but the truth is that we are stretched thin.

This bill sets the stage for the next phase of our work, which is focused on creating and helping agencies utilize an environmental vulnerability analysis. It also acknowledges the need for additional staffing and critical funding resources. By re-envisioning the task force as a permanent council and establishing DEQ as its fiscal agent, we will be much better situated to do the work that is so urgently needed.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these issues. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at qread@biologicaldiversity.org.