

My name is Laura Jazmin Cortez. I live on Unceded Tongva land in Southeast Los Angeles. I am a member, organizer, and co-director with East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice (East Yard), an organization created by community in Southeast and East Los Angeles to address pollution through self-advocacy for a dignified quality of life. East Yard works in communities that are overburdened with direct and indirect sources of pollution from Long Beach to the Eastside of Los Angeles. As a community we work to address air, soil, and water quality. At the intersection of these types of pollution is environmental racism. Our communities are under-resourced, and though our organization does great work in our community, we will continue to fall short of the dignity we deserve for our health if the Federal government does not lead the way in protecting EVERYONES health. The Environmental Justice for All Act is both a concrete commitment to the communities that have been harmed and a symbolic sign of respect to communities on the ground doing the work and the committee that put this language together. The next section highlights the work our communities continue to do in relation to the EJ4A Act that passing this policy will uplift and support.

### Health Equity

- Community & scholarly institutions have developed healthy relationships locally, regionally and nationally to create community based research, such as our water contamination program, H2Ours<sup>1</sup>. H2Ours focuses on community-based research to study public drinking water and learn about water contaminants and water agencies.
- Because there are so many types of industries producing toxins in our communities, there is a huge need for continued and ongoing research. One such industry is rendering plants, of which we have five in close proximity to each other and smell the odor of decomposing animal carcasses daily<sup>2</sup>. The foul stench of this process to create cosmetics and food products can cause harm to human health as well as severely limit our access to the outside world, as we are forced to close our doors and windows to stop the smell from permeating our homes.

### Cumulative Impacts

- There is no single “evil villain” polluter in EJ communities. What I see as one of the largest issues is that municipalities and agencies currently treat polluters on a case by case basis without assessing cumulative impacts. I grew up next to railroad tracks with trains passing at 3am; I have always lived within 5 minutes of refinery and within a block of warehouses; I attended elementary school next to the 710 freeway that sees 40,000-60,000 daily truck trips; My high school’s track was immediately next to train tracks. My reality is not an exception, and honestly, community is exposed to so much more... at the same time... all the time.

1. <https://h2Ours.org/>

2. <http://www.aqmd.gov/home/news-events/community-investigations/rendering-plants#>

3. [http://eycej.org/programs/httpseycej-nationbuilder-comthe\\_marina\\_pando\\_social\\_justice\\_research\\_collaborative\\_mpsjrc2016/](http://eycej.org/programs/httpseycej-nationbuilder-comthe_marina_pando_social_justice_research_collaborative_mpsjrc2016/)

4. <https://planning.lacounty.gov/greenzones>

- EJ4A has the opportunity to address our realities: that we experience cumulative impacts, and municipalities, agencies, states and the federal government must consider the totality of toxic exposures in our communities in the permitting process.

#### Outdoor Access for All

- Because our communities are oversaturated with numerous polluters, there are few parks and recreational spaces in our community. The recreational spaces that do exist are a risk to community health since they are along freeways, railyards and polluters. I have the privilege to live near a park where I run along the Rio Hondo Riverbed. On my run I pass along a train crossing, a metal plating facility, a truck refrigerated unit (TRU) facility, a refuse station, a refinery, and two freeways. Many more community members are in close proximity to these types of polluters, without the park access. We need more parks because we are deserving of having safe spaces to enjoy life.
- In a high density area such as California & LA specifically, the only spaces that are undeveloped are brownfields. This is why we do work nationally with the Moving Forward Network and locally through brownfields to healthfields. There is opportunity for the policy to create green spaces through investment in the clean up of these contaminated sites and community based processes. One such example is Maywood Riverfront Park, a former brownfield that was cleaned and developed as a community open space, which is now a thriving social hub.

#### Environmental Justice Grants Programs

- Federal funding for research in our communities is needed. We have seen research in our communities lead to discoveries that challenge agencies and health thresholds through our Marina Pando Social Justice Research Collaborative (MPSJRC)<sup>3</sup>. We have studied lead soil contamination, toxic runoff into the LA River, and more. These studies are done by community members using academic methodology to study the environmental justice issues that our community lacks responses to. The outcomes of these studies are then shared through community events to make sure research is done by our hood, for our hood.
- The federal government has an important role in developing & implementing EJ projects. What we see on the ground is that state, regional, and local agencies hesitate to invest and implement EJ projects because they are waiting on another entity to lead. EJ4A could shift how other institutions invest in polluted communities, which would also uplift community leadership. One such example is the collaboration between LA County and East Yard to create a Green Zones policy<sup>4</sup>; the policy consisted of community led groundtruthing and consistent communication between LA County and East Yard as the

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policy was created. The now adopted policy will stabilize land use in the area and create buffers between community and polluters.

## NEPA

- NEPA, as it has been interpreted in my home of California through CEQA, has the potential to protect our communities from polluters. Unfortunately, that is far from the case now. The policy allows for the creation of studies so we can understand the harms in our communities through an Environmental Impact Report (EIR). In our communities EIRs are often waived through Negative Declarations. When EIRs are completed due to community requests, they do not reflect our lived realities: traffic bottlenecks & idling are unreported, housing in proximity to polluters is unaccounted for, housing affordability is not discussed, local jobs cannot be implemented on federally funded projects, green space is not considered.
- The CEQA/NEPA process does not consider grassroots community engagement: we are expected to read 5000 page reports and make comments on technical documents with no assistance to understand the language and with 30 days cited as sufficient time. I will highlight here that these barriers do not stop the community. At East Yard we have created community based committees to look at project EIRs and write comment letters. However, this policy needs to be amended to make community-inclusive changes.
- Tribal representation in the NEPA process must be strengthened. In the dozens of EIRs we have reviewed, tribal representation consists of a letter being sent to the tribal institution, placing the burden of a response on a few tribal representatives. We must acknowledge that we are all on Native land and the burden is on us (non-Native folks) to ensure due diligence and respect to the land and its historic uses.

## Fair and Just Transition

- EJ communities consist of a mostly working class whose employment is related to toxic exposure. In my community this looks like working at the ports, as truck drivers, in refineries, waste facilities, and rendering plants; then coming home to more contaminated soil, air, and water. Therefore environmental justice will always be linked to labor and a need to protect the health of workers, who are also our parents, uncles, sisters, and children, while ensuring we have stable careers.
- EJ4A proposes a Federal Energy Transition Economic Development Assistance Fund that is needed to ensure a just transition in which workers suffering the health impacts of the oil & gas industry can develop the skills to work in the healthier systems that we are working toward. We stand firmly that we do not have to sacrifice our lives for labor, and we deserve zero emissions jobs and the respective improved health that comes with it.

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I absolutely love our EJ communities. We are full of solutions, we have the answers, we have been doing this work. Being an EJ community is not fun, it is not prideful; It carries a heavy burden and responsibility to fight for ourselves and each other or die slowly. This is not an exaggeration. Passing Environmental Justice for All is that serious. Passing any policy that protects human health without giving loopholes to industry is that important, it is life and death. We must acknowledge that countless EJ community leaders have worked on these types of solutions, many of them are no longer with us. And we now have this policy as an opportunity to take environmental justice seriously.

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