

Testimony of Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks, Assistant Professor, Environmental and Health Sciences/Chairperson, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA), Before the House Oversight Committee's Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife Hearing on Environmental Justice for Coastal Communities: Examining Inequities in Federal Grantmaking.

Thursday, October 15, 2020

Good afternoon. To Chairman Huffman and other members of the Water, Oceans, and Wildlife Committee, I thank you for inviting me to share with you on today, and I thank you for taking up this very timely and important topic.

My name is Na'Taki Osborne Jelks, and I am an assistant professor in the Environmental and Health Sciences Program at Spelman College, a historically Black College and global leader of education of women of African descent, located in Atlanta, Georgia.

In addition to my role at Spelman, I lead the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, a community-based environmental justice organization that works to grow a cleaner, greener, healthier, more sustainable West Atlanta. WAWA serves low wealth and communities of color in the Proctor, Utoy, and Sandy Creek Watersheds of Northwest and Southwest Atlanta--- those overburdened with environmental stressors, but often least represented at environmental decision-making tables. Established as a result of community efforts to halt perceived discriminatory wastewater treatment practices in West Atlanta, we have grown to become an impactful force in community-centered sustainable development. For over 20 years, WAWA has pioneered efforts to advance community-led watershed protection and restoration, environmental education, and environmental justice in Northwest and Southwest Atlanta neighborhoods.

For over four years, WAWA served at the Urban Waters Federal Partnership for Atlanta's Proctor Creek Watershed. The Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP), part of the EPA Urban Waters Program, seeks to reconnect urban communities, particularly those that are overburdened or economically distressed, with their waterways to become stewards for clean urban waters. Through the Partnership, communities gain economic, environmental, and social benefits, and collaborate with Federal, state and local agencies, and community-led efforts to achieve common goals. The UWFP is supported by 15 Federal agencies and many non-governmental organization (NGO) partners working in 20 designated locations. In 2013 EPA designated Proctor Creek on Atlanta's Westside, supported by the Mayor of the City of Atlanta, as number 18 of just 20 Urban Waters Federal Partnership locations in the United States and Puerto Rico.

WAWA works with residents in Proctor Creek communities to improve the health of our water and land while also addressing other critical community priorities. Along with residents, we have been driving force in community efforts to operationalize the environmental and economic potential of clean water and thriving waterfronts. This work is a work in progress, but we have significantly assisted the members of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership connect with the

needs of the individual communities so the partnership can put its expertise and resources to use in ways that will protect health, improve the environment and strengthen local economies. As the Ambassador, our organization has represented a coordinated approach to partnering with local organizations and federal agencies, the State of Georgia, and the City of Atlanta, working across the watershed to restore Proctor Creek, which empties into the Chattahoochee River, the drinking water source for over 70% of metro Atlanta and the most heavily-used water resource in Georgia.

While Atlanta is not a coastal community. We are all connected. From the creeks to the coasts, oceans, and seas, we ----both inland and coastal communities are impacted by climate change. Our waterways are plagued with pollution. We see and feel the effects of flooding, erosion and land loss, displacement, loss of material property, economic devastation, and poor health outcomes.

As a nation we must be committed to protecting and enhancing our coasts and coastal communities for current and future generations. We must do this work through careful planning and regulation of environmentally-sustainable development, rigorous use of science, strong public participation, education, and effective public-private-community partnerships.

Blackbelt communities in the deep south and in our coastal areas are by disproportionately affected by climate change. Communities of color and low-income communities in coastal areas across the country are facing displacement----they are being disconnected from their sense of place, disconnected from their homes, and becoming climate refugees.

For Gullah Geechee people who are descendants of both escaped and freed slaves off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia coast, dealing with the reality of sea level rise and other impacts of climate change are everyday occurrences. Native communities along Louisiana coasts are losing lands that they have lived on for more than a century as that land disappears into the sea.

To increase opportunities for environmental justice, climate resilience, and to ensure the protection of our waters, oceans, wildlife, and human communities in these coastal areas, we must invest in these natural resources and the proximate human communities. More robust investments must be made in environmental justice communities who are not only bearing the brunt of the inadequate action on climate change, but who are also suffering from systemic inequities that have shaped past inadequate investments or in some cases divestment of needed financial resources to ensure whole, healthy, thriving communities.

Funds need to be available to get into the hands of community-based, environmental justice organizations who know and understand the needs of communities that have bear the brunt of climate vulnerabilities. In addition to being disproportionately impacted by climate change, these often low-income communities and communities of color also suffer disproportionately from negative environmental factors: poor air quality, sub-standard housing, lack of healthy food options, Lack of access to clean, affordable drinking water and the lack of clean, safe open spaces such as parks and playgrounds. We can also look to other factors such as lack of access to high-paying jobs,

inadequate access to healthcare and other crucial services, as well inadequate built environment infrastructure that put these communities at risk. These are the same communities that need funding to help recover from natural and unnatural disasters as well as resources to restore and protect the coastal areas that they call home.

More equitable funding programs are needed. The communities who are impacted most by climate change should be prioritized in funding. Approaches like what is proposed in the Environmental Justice for All act are a great start to the types of investments we need. Funding is needed to support research, and research collaboratives between academic institutions and grassroots, environmental justice communities. education, community science initiatives, authentic community engagement, development, and implementation of projects to address environmental and public health issues in environmental justice communities.

Sound management of our natural resources supports sustainable development, a healthy environment, and protection of both wildlife and human communities.

As I close, I ask that you consider opportunities to bolster your investments in environmental justice communities, remove barriers associated with getting funds into the hands of grassroots organizations—not just the non-profits who work with communities. Allow them to steer the dollars in the areas of greatest need. Center those organizations in RFPs from funding agencies. Where there are barriers with respect to requesting financial audits, create other means of assessing organizations' ability to appropriately manage federal funds. Provide opportunities for multi-year funding as well as larger grants. We can't fix systemic problems with an incremental approach supported by a one-year, non-renewable, small grant.

While funding community-based organizations is of primary importance, HBCUs are inadequately funded in this realm as well. Open up funding mechanisms for historically Black colleges and universities to serve as academic partners work collaboratively with the very communities whose very survival is tied to their missions. Remove barriers for HBCUs with respect to funding mechanisms that require matching funds to access and to be scored optimally for funding decisions.

Conduct an analysis of where funding from the agencies that you oversee has gone. Develop and implement new opportunities that center the needs of environmental justice communities, and arm them with the critical resources required to protect and restore our waters, oceans, wildlife, and human populations.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering your questions.