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Environmental Justice Year in Review 2019

California Coastal Commission





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The California Coastal Commission demonstrated its commitment to advancing environmental justice (“EJ”) in 2019, taking actions to maximize public access, promote equity principles, and lift up the contributions of marginalized communities while protecting ecosystem health and sensitive habitats. On March 8, 2019, after two years of outreach, planning and public hearings, the Commission unanimously adopted its first [Environmental Justice Policy](#), to guide its consideration of EJ principles in permitting decisions pursuant to Coastal Act Section 30604. The result of extensive collaboration with EJ leaders and community groups, and three public hearings, the Commission’s EJ policy contains a strong policy statement, specific commitments in 9 issue areas, and a detailed implementation plan.



Members of the Coastal Commission's Environmental Justice team in front of the California African American Museum in Los Angeles prior to the Environmental Justice Policy's adoption in March.

Once adopted, the Commission wasted no time putting the new policy to work.

At the same meeting in March, Commissioners added special conditions to the [Santa Monica Civic Center](#) and Soccer Field project to require educational signs and programs referencing the history of marginalized communities and discriminatory land use planning practices in the area that deprived people of color of their homes.

Commissioners also added special conditions to the City of Santa Monica's [proposal to expand the Boardwalk](#) by requiring interpretive signs along the Boardwalk at Bay Street, directing visitors to the nearby Inkwell Beach Historical Monument, which memorializes the history of that beach as a popular public beach where African Americans frequently gathered in the early and mid-19th Century when they were excluded from other public beaches.

In May, the [Sun Soaked Music Festival](#) project was the first staff report to incorporate detailed EJ findings. Tickets to the proposed summertime weekend music festival on Alamitos Beach in the City of Long Beach cost between \$125 and \$450 per ticket, accompanied by 7 days of free community events. The stadium, stage, and associated facilities would have occupied more than 600,000 feet of public beach space and another 25,000 feet of public park land. The Commission approved the permit with a number of special conditions based on extensive EJ findings, including distribution of 5,000 free concert tickets. Additional conditions increased not only the ability of underserved community members to attend and enjoy the free events, but also contributed to other targeted public access programs that are implemented throughout the year. Although the concert itself was ultimately cancelled, the inclusive free events took place as enhanced by Commission actions.



Chuck Graham

Compromise at Surf Beach: An improved beach management plan balances public access with the needs of the threatened snowy plover

In December, the Commission concurred with a [Federal Consistency Determination](#) that will expand public beach access at Surf Beach in Santa Barbara County, while still protecting the snowy plover. This had particular significance for residents of Lompoc, who have very limited beach access due to their proximity to Vandenberg Air Force Base, along with seasonal beach closures at Surf Beach to protect nesting plovers for much of the summer. Because this raised both public access and EJ issues, Commission staff led a multi-agency effort over the summer with the Air Force, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, City of Lompoc, County of Santa Barbara, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife to consider options to modify Vandenberg's Beach Management Plan to improve public access during the summer season while maintaining protective measures for plovers. As a result, the Air Force and the Service agreed to implement an experimental program, which began in late August 2019, to discontinue the automatic closure of Surf Beach. The Air Force will continue to implement public education docent programs, conduct law enforcement patrols and issue citations for violations of plover protection measures, and retains the authority to close the beach to the public should the experiment result in unacceptable adverse effects to snowy plovers or plover habitat. This solution was a positive example of how EJ concepts can be applied consistent with the public access and environmentally sensitive habitat policies of the Coastal Act.

Overall, since the adoption of the policy, the environmental justice team has analyzed and developed new findings on potential environmental justice issues arising from 16 development projects. These have touched on a broad range of topics such as affordable housing, lower-cost accommodations, industrial development and coastal access. Staff has also been reviewing the environmental justice sections in a half dozen local coastal programs (LCP).

In July, the Commission's annual review of the [Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area](#) (ODSVRA) included for the first time an analysis of the facility's disproportionate burdens on the adjacent town of Oceano, one of the most disadvantaged communities on the Central Coast. The impacts on the community from vehicle use contributed to the staff recommendation that, among other things, State Parks should explore transitioning ODSVRA to non-motorized recreational uses. Although Commissioners did not vote to approve the recommendation, they did vote to revisit the issue in one year, giving State Parks additional time to [incorporate the Commission's recommended operational changes](#) into the draft Public Works Plan that State Parks is currently developing.

During the November Commission hearing, members of the public were able to deliver remote testimony, marking a historical first for the agency.



In November, the Commission heard emotional testimony from residents on the Monterey Peninsula regarding the potential impacts of the proposed [Cal Am desalination facility](#). For the first time in the Commission's history, some of that testimony was delivered to the Commission remotely, in multiple languages, via video conference link from a site near the project in the city of Marina. Citing the Commission's EJ Policy regarding the commitment to provide equitable access to the public decision-making process, the Commission made special provisions to accommodate the lower-income residents of Marina and Seaside who were unable to travel to the Commission meeting in Half Moon Bay. Although the project was continued, the EJ findings and the additional testimony provided an important perspective for the Commission to consider in its deliberations.

Staff has continued to increase efforts to expand engagement and accessibility. This includes scheduling hearings in underserved communities, producing a webinar summarizing the new policy for the public in accessible language, going to affected communities to meet with stakeholders, creating FAQ sheets in accessible language for stakeholders to share with their communities and using the EJ listerv to share important information.

In December 2019, staff released a draft of the Commission's next strategic plan that for the first time included environmental justice goals and actions. Many of the goals in the draft strategic plan have been taken from the implementation actions of the Commission's EJ policy to provide ongoing accountability and transparency of the Commission's progress in implementing its EJ policy. Commission will vote on the final strategic plan in 2020.

Throughout the year, approximately 20 Commission staff members completed their second year of training on race and equity principles in Sacramento, as part of a group of approximately 12 state agencies with the [Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#) (GARE). Because the Commission wanted to integrate the principles of environmental justice throughout the agency, the team focused on creating a racial equity action plan with a long list of actions and goals to improve recruitment, hiring, retention and training. Several items have already been accomplished, including the creation of an onboarding packet for new staff, adding racial equity language to job postings and job descriptions, and receiving approval for two new staff positions to focus on EJ and coordinate with staff working on tribal issues.

Staff ended the year preparing for two all-day staff trainings in Southern California and in Northern California scheduled for January 2020. Staff invited experts on environmental justice from CalEPA, the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE) and the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) to talk about the foundational concepts of environmental justice and racial equity. Staff also prepared and held breakout sessions on EJ policy implementation, meaningful engagement, unconscious bias, and diversity and inclusion in the workplace.



Kenric Martinez