

League of Women Voters of Dane County Forum

February 13, 2024

Achieving Environmental Justice in Wisconsin

Date: February 13, 2024, 6:30-8:00 pm

Location: Online via zoom, register here to get link:

[Achieving Environmental Justice in Wisconsin - Events](#)

This program has been planned by the LaCrosse Area League of Women Voters and is co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Dane County.

Panelists

- **Julie Majerus** Environmental Justice Policy Advisor, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
- **Meleesa Johnson** Executive Director, WI Greenfire

What does it mean to achieve environmental justice in Wisconsin? We will discuss the basic principles of environmental justice, learn about some examples of this work in practice across the state, and discuss the challenges and how we can empower communities to reach identified goals.

Discussion Questions

1. What did you learn about the principles of environmental justice?
2. What are the challenges to achieving environmental justice in Wisconsin?
3. What are some examples of applying environmental justice in Wisconsin?
4. What are some examples of applying environmental justice in Dane County?
5. Should the State League develop a position on environmental justice?

League Position

Support of a physical environment beneficial to life; action to promote wise use of ground and surface water resources and improvement of water, air, and soil quality. [Standards and Enforcement | MyLO](#)

Promote the fiscal, social, cultural, residential, educational and environmental quality of life for all residents. [Community Policy | MyLO](#)

Background and History of Environmental Justice

History of Environmental Justice

In the U.S., an environmental justice movement (not to be confused with the environmental activism movement started in the late 1800s) was inspired by the civil rights movement that publicly emerged in the 1950s and gained momentum in the 1980s, according to the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC). [The Environmental Justice Movement](#) is, in a way, a response to environmental racism. Two short videos:

[History of Environmental Justice in the US](#)

[What is Environmental Justice?](#)

Environmental and Social Justice—the two often go hand-in-hand

Social and environmental justice are similar terms that often complement each other. Their similarities frequently cause confusion and misinterpretation within society. To understand the two terms independently, we must assess their fundamental differences.

A study commissioned by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice during the 1980s focused on toxic waste distribution throughout the United States. This study found that more than 15 million African Americans, as well as millions of Hispanics and Native Americans, lived close to at least one toxic waste site. [A Movement Is Born: Environmental Justice and the UCC - United Church of Christ](#)

Social justice signifies society's equal economic, social, and political rights and opportunities. **When defending social justice, you must explore the access to rights, opportunities, and treatment of community or individual members.** Forms of social injustice, like racism, sexism, and sexual orientation discrimination, regularly interfere with one's freedom and opportunities. Environmental justice is primarily concerned with environmental factors' positive and negative effects on an ecocentric view of society, evaluating it as

part of the global ecosystem. Environmental justice deals explicitly with the distribution of environmental benefits and the burdens experienced by different communities.

What are the Major Differences?

The significant differences between social and environmental justice are their views of humanity. The social version examines society through an **anthropocentric lens**. It views humans as the vital or most important element on Earth. The **ecocentric perspective** expands the scope, exploring the connection between air, water, and land to humanity's safety. It examines society's relationship with the environment and, in turn, with itself. Unlike the anthropocentric view, environmental justice recognizes humanity's small part in a more extensive, interrelated system.

Examples of Groups Working toward Environmental Justice in Wisconsin and Dane County

Coalition Opposing Enbridge Line 5

In 2019, the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa sued the Enbridge Corporation over its Line 5, which carries oil from Canadian tar sands and crosses sensitive lands and waterways of the Band's territory in northern Wisconsin. The aging pipeline (it was built in 1953) has had 29 spills over that period. In June 2023, a US federal judge ordered Enbridge to shut down the section of pipeline that runs through the tribe's territory. Later that month, Enbridge filed an appeal with the U.S. 7th Circuit Court of Appeals seeking to block the shutdown. A coalition of organizations including the Indigenous Women's Treaty Alliance, The Bad River Band, Native Lives Matter Coalition, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation have joined forces to support shutting the pipeline down.

[Tribal leaders, environmental advocates decry Enbridge appeal of Line 5 ruling - Wisconsin Examiner](#)

[Indigenous leaders urge Biden to shut down Line 5 pipeline due to 'imminent' threat * Michigan Advance](#)

[A Battle for the Future of the Great Lakes | Sierra Club](#)

Safe Skies Clean Water Wisconsin

This non-profit, community-based organization seeks to stop the harms resulting from Air National Guard F-35 fighter jets based at Truax Field, including noise pollution and PFAs (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances)

released through firefighting foam. [The Air National Guard has stopped using firefighting materials that contain PFAs, but these “forever chemicals” remain in local soils and waterways]. Community members have been actively involved in “citizen science,” monitoring noise levels and PFAs in waterways like Starkweather Creek. In March 2022, SSCWW filed a Title VI (discrimination) complaint with the Environmental Protection Agency, claiming that the siting of the jets has disproportionate effects on low-income residents and families of color living in communities near Truax Field. The EPA has not yet determined if the complaint meets requirements for investigation. Another environmental justice aspect of this situation involves what has happened to the PFAs that the WI Department of Natural Resources has removed from the area surrounding Truax. These chemicals have been shipped to a landfill in a poor, rural, majority-Black community in Alabama. (See the PBS article below).

[Madison residents still negatively impacted by arrival of F-35 fighter jets | Madison365](#)

[Wisconsin PFAS cleanup shifts toxic burden to Alabama's Black Belt](#)

Coalition for More Responsible Transportation

This coalition of groups have come together to oppose I-94 expansion plans. They have attempted to make the case that expansion would be bad for Milwaukee residents and would disproportionately affect the city’s Black and brown communities, by worsening racial and economic segregation, while failing to provide transit improvements those communities need. They argue that expansion would benefit predominantly white commuters and would have harmful environmental effects on surrounding neighborhoods and on the climate. Groups involved in the coalition include the ACLU of Wisconsin, MICAH [Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope], Milwaukee Riverkeepers, Sierra Club, 1000 Friends of Wisconsin.

[Ahead of first hearing, advocates press criticisms of widening Milwaukee freeway - Wisconsin Examiner](#)

[ACLU of Wisconsin and Other Organizations Submit Comments Opposing I-94 Freeway Expansion](#)

Walnut Way Conservation Corporation

Located in Milwaukee’s Lindsay Heights neighborhood, Walnut Way’s mission is to create economic diversity through environmental stewardship, community engagement, and education. Their environmental justice

initiatives include green infrastructure programs, a green jobs initiative, Blue Skies Landscaping, and advocacy for fair energy policies.

[How a Milwaukee neighborhood organization is trying to change the debate on electric, gas rates in southeast Wisconsin](#)

[Outpost and Walnut Way Partner on a Sustainable Urban Agriculture Program for Milwaukee Youth](#)

Actions You Can Take:

1. Contact or support these groups:
 - [Wisconsin EcoLatinos](#)
 - [Cream City Conservation](#)
 - [Project Home](#)
 - [Walnut Way Conservation Corp](#)
 - [Wisconsin Green Muslims](#)
 - [Safe Skies Clean Water Wisconsin](#)
 - [Coalition for More Responsible Transportation in Wisconsin](#)
 - [Madison Environmental Justice](#)
 - [350 Wisconsin Climate Justice Initiative](#)
2. Improve social and environmental justice by voting for effective and sustainable regulations considering the holistic problem.
3. Reach out to your community members, increasing their awareness of local injustices. Talk around the dinner table or the coffee shop table.
4. Write letters to the editor in your neighborhood communications to local, state, and national news organizations.
5. Help raise messages from affected or committed organizations addressing issues.
6. Volunteer for social and ecological activist groups, supporting society's protection.
7. Your suggestions?

These resource materials were prepared by Jane Collins, Sue Jennik and Cara Lee Mahany.