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# SUMMARY RECORD

THIRTY-FIRST REGULAR SESSION OF THE COUNCIL

Public Session

Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC)

26 June 2024

Wilmington, North Carolina, United States of America



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**THIRTY-FIRST REGULAR SESSION OF THE CEC COUNCIL**  
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**2024 COUNCIL PUBLIC SESSION – SUMMARY RECORD**

**WELCOMING REMARKS AND PRESENTATION OF VIDEO ON CEC’S ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

The CEC Executive Director, Jorge Daniel Taillant, opened the meeting by welcoming the public, the Council members and the delegations from the three countries to the CEC’s 31st Council Session. He began by acknowledging the traditional territories of the Waccamaw, Catawba and the Cape Fear People, and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to live, learn and share on this territory.

Pointing to the theme of the 2024 Council Session—Strengthening Environmental Justice through Community Empowerment—he mentioned that the discussion during the Council public session would include considerations, such as: 1) how pollution can affect our environment and wellbeing; 2) ways to promote community engagement to deal with environmental and racial injustices; and 3) examples of how organizations have created solutions and worked directly with communities to strengthen environmental justice.

The Executive Director then introduced the video of CEC's accomplishments since the 2023 Council Session in Canada. He said the video highlights how the expanded trinational work program responds to the triple planetary crisis, and the unique value of the CEC in creating networks and bringing people together to tackle our pressing environmental challenges, develop tools and resources to better understand environmental data, and make information available to the public at-large. It also portrays how we have helped facilitate knowledge-exchange across our continent, our efforts to raise awareness and foster positive environmental action, and how we facilitate public engagement to help empower communities, particularly Indigenous communities and marginalized and underserved communities, which are on the frontlines of climate change.

Executive Director Taillant then invited Emiliano Reyes, a member of the GELP external selection committee and participant in the CECs *LGBTQI+ Dimensions of Climate Change and Environmental Justice in North America* roundtable held in October 2023, to introduce the Generation of Environmental Leaders Program (GELP), announce the three selected GELP teams and invite a representative from each team to join the Council members on stage.

**GENERATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS PROGRAM (GELP)**

Before announcing the three selected teams of the first cohort of the CEC’s GELP, Emiliano Reyes stressed the importance of engaging youth leaders to accelerate knowledge-sharing and spark cross-generational conversations on environmental challenges. He explained that embracing their perspectives ensures equitable outcomes and expands environmental initiatives, fostering connections across borders and backgrounds.

Emiliano then introduced the GELP as part of the CEC's new Youth Engagement Strategy. He

explained that this initiative supports youth leaders in their communities across North America and provides tangible support and opportunities, from skill-building workshops to connections with experts and decision-makers. He expressed admiration for the dedication of youth leaders across Canada, Mexico, and the United States and enthusiastically introduced the members of the first GELP program cohort, who were selected for their bold solutions to support North American communities and preserve our shared waters, lands and air:

**Jacob Barnet and McKenna Dunbar, from the United States, with the solution “*Electrivive: An Equitable Building Electrification Workforce Redevelopment Tool*”**

This solution addresses the renewable energy skilled labor shortage by training incarcerated individuals in Virginia. Its curriculum, covering energy-efficient building design for smart control systems, empowers participants by equipping them with marketable skills for green careers, as well as aiming to reduce recidivism and foster economic growth. As part of the Building Electrification Education Module (BEEM), *Electrivive* integrates sustainable practices and workforce development, promoting environmental stewardship and social justice.

**Alexandre Savard, from Canada, with the solution “*Encore! Biomatériaux*”**

This solution aims to tackle the plastics pollution crisis and change single-use plastic by creating greener, compostable packaging made from upcycled agri-food waste to forge the path to a sustainable society. It not only features low-energy low-cost production, but also a remarkable flexibility for accommodating different types of waste that can be recovered with operational simplicity.

**Ana Cristina Posadas García, from Mexico, with the solution “Education for the restoration and conservation of the Ciénega of Tamasopo Wetland, RAMSAR Site (*Educación para la restauración y conservación del Humedal Sitio RAMSAR Ciénega de Tamasopo*)”**

This solution aims to gradually restore the ciénega of Tamasopo wetland, a RAMSAR site, which faces a variety of major threats, including agricultural and livestock activity, as well as exposure to contaminants. This will be achieved through environmental education, reforestation and conservation strategies. At the same time, the community’s needs will also be addressed and prioritized.

The presentation of these solutions was followed by an exchange with the Council members:

Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) Sandra McCardell (Canada) asked Alexandre Savard, co-founder of *Encore! Biomatériaux*, how he sees the GELP program advancing their project and future thinking, and what does he see as the eventual outcome of participating in this program.

Alexandre Savard said that this opportunity is extraordinary, as it will facilitate connections with young people from Mexico and the United States and provide mentorship from experienced individuals. He added that the mentors will offer invaluable external perspectives and support, ensuring that the team is on the right track. He concluded by emphasizing the need to draw inspiration from nature, to be able to use its materials for the future and to develop materials that not only serve their intended purposes but also have an environmentally acceptable end-of-life process.

Undersecretary Iván Rico López, from Mexico, asked all representatives about the biggest challenge they have faced in developing their projects.

Ana Cristina Posadas described the significant challenge of community invisibility in their work areas. This invisibility complicates efforts to establish environmental management units and navigate the bureaucratic landscape. She added that, in addition, the pervasive violence in the country poses a

constant threat. Despite these obstacles, she emphasized that the unwavering support of the local communities has been instrumental in their progress, and that their approach has always been to work with the community, for the community, rather than at its expense.

Jacob Barnett noted the lack of community-based solutions and the overemphasis on top-down approaches that often overlook local needs. He explained that communities are aware of their needs and communicate them, but that these needs are frequently ignored. Jacob emphasized the challenge of shifting away from a legacy of fossil fuel dependence and praised his co-founder, McKenna Dunbar, for their inspiring work. He concluded that unified, community-based initiatives are essential for addressing these challenges.

Alexandre Savard identified the biggest challenge is educating the public and changing deeply ingrained habits. He noted that plastic is an exceptionally versatile material, being waterproof, airtight, and cost-effective, and that competing effectively with plastic on these properties is nearly impossible. However, he explained that he envisions several ways to apply more natural and environmentally friendly objects, which do not necessarily require plastic, but the challenge lies in rethinking regulations and daily interactions with plastic to reduce unnecessary use. He concluded by saying that this shift requires significant effort in education and the promotion of alternative materials that are more sustainable.

Deputy Administrator Janet McCabe, from the United States, extended her congratulations to the participants, acknowledging the remarkable efforts and innovative approaches demonstrated in their solutions. She expressed admiration for the range of ideas and the integral problem-solving strategies employed by our youth in their effort to mitigate the impacts of climate change. She emphasized the importance of the interconnected perspective that the younger generations bring to these issues, and has found the multifaceted solutions proposed by the participants to be particularly impressive, as they address various aspects of environmental challenges simultaneously.

CEC Executive Director Jorge Daniel Taillant then acted as facilitator for the dialogue with the Council, on Strengthening Environmental Justice through Community Empowerment, and moderated the experts dialogue and question-and-answer session with public participants.

## **DIALOGUE WITH THE COUNCIL ON STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THROUGH COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT**

Executive Director Taillant welcomed everyone to the Dialogue with the Council and introduced the invited experts from the three countries: 1) William Barber III from the United States, Senior Director of Impact and Equitable Investments at the Coalition for Green Capital, who has served over the course of his career as an environmental advocate, a renewable energy executive, and a climate scholar; 2) Fe de Leon from Canada, senior researcher and a paralegal with the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), who has worked extensively on chemicals and waste management policy issues and promoted community right-to-know and regimes to strengthen public participation in decision-making processes with underserved and disadvantaged communities; and 3) Emiliano Reyes from Mexico, who focuses on climate justice, intersectionality, intergenerational equity, gender equality, resilience, and just transitions. He represented Mexico as a delegate at the G20, was lead adaptation negotiator in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), served as an expert at the CEC's *LGBTQI+ Dimensions of Climate Change and Environmental Justice in North America* roundtable, and co-authored the recently-concluded paper on the same topic. Currently, he works as a Technical Advisor on Climate Change at the *Deutsche*

*Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ)*, the main German development agency specializing in climate policy.

Mr. Taillant then briefly outlined the format of the dialogue session and the ways for the public to submit questions.

### **Council members remarks on environmental justice**

Acting as facilitator, Mr. Taillant invited the three Council members to present domestic examples of strengthening environmental justice through community empowerment.

Mr. Taillant first invited Deputy Administrator (DA) McCabe to share actions that are taking place in the United States on community empowerment and environmental justice.

DA McCabe began by stating that, since 2021, Administration Regan launched *Journey to Justice*. Along with numerous EPA staff members, he has traveled across the deep south, including, for example Puerto Rico, West Virginia, and also, most recently, to tribal communities in Alaska. This initiative aims to address the long-standing injustices faced by many communities, particularly those that are low-income and communities of color, she said. For too long, these communities have suffered unjustly and continue to suffer unjustly from inadequate water infrastructure, high levels of environmental pollution, and the worsening impacts of a rapidly changing climate, with associated impacts on public health, the economy, quality of life, and the future of those communities, she added.

She then mentioned that Administrator Regan's *Journey to Justice* provides an opportunity to meet face-to-face with the people in those communities, to hear and see first hand the challenges that they endure. His approach emphasizes listening to those most impacted by the EPA's work and collaborating to develop strong, lasting, community-based solutions.

She provided one notable example in response to concerns that were heard from communities located near a polluting power plant in Puerto Rico. The EPA has invested \$100,000 to launch two pilot projects in collaboration with community leaders and the Puerto Rican government. Additionally, communities in West Virginia have experienced the impacts of centralized and inadequate wastewater systems for years, such as sewage running in their backyards. To address this, the EPA appointed an ombudsperson to act as a liaison between the communities, the federal agencies, and partners to ensure that the county's water issues are finally addressed.

She then noted that, in 2022, a new office within the EPA, the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights, was created. It is staffed by two hundred dedicated professionals and focuses on environmental justice and external civil rights as a way of bringing communities' concerns to the table in an equal posture with other offices within the EPA such as the Office of Air, Water and other major offices.

DA McCabe underlined how this organizational change has been pivotal in driving the EPA's commitment to President Biden's directive for federal agencies to deliver at least 40% of federal investments to disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, she mentioned that this directive represents an extraordinary commitment and a "direction by the President to our agencies, one that we've never seen before, and that we are being held accountable to. Everything we're doing at EPA is rooted in the belief that everyone, no matter the color of their skin, the money in their pocket, or their zip code, deserves to live in and realize the full protections of our environmental laws", she concluded.

The facilitator thanked DA McCabe and turned to Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) Sandra McCardell to ask her what strengthening environmental justice through community empowerment looks like in Canada.

ADM McCardell started off with a reflection on the significant strides being made in environmental justice across the three countries: “I’ve been really struck over the last day, exactly about the point you’ve just made, which is how much is happening on environmental justice in our three countries and it’s all to the good.”

She recalled that during summer 2023 the Canadian Parliament passed a law enshrining for all Canadians the right to a healthy environment. This law, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, includes the principle of environmental justice. Building on this foundation, a new piece of legislation was passed on 20 June 2024, following decades of grassroots advocacy work that have taken the full form of a new law on June 20, 2024, specifically to pursue environmental justice. This new law, titled ["An Act Respecting the Development of a National Strategy to Assess, Prevent, and Address Environmental Racism and to Advance Environmental Justice"](#) acknowledges the ongoing environmental inequities across Canada and requires that the Minister develop a national strategy to “promote efforts across Canada to advance environmental justice and to assess, prevent and address environmental racism”. It also acknowledges that Indigenous, racialized and marginalized people are more likely to live in environmentally hazardous areas.

ADM McCardell indicated that striving for environmental justice means drawing a line between the health of a localized population and exposure to environmental risk and she stressed that doing this requires a focused approach. With this new legislation, the Government of Canada recognizes that while every Canadian has the right to a healthy environment, there are some people who have faced injustice in the form of environmental racism for decades. They are the ones who live with the burden of pollution. The Government of Canada aims to develop a strategy that will provide a comprehensive framework to assess, prevent and address environmental risks and injustices faced by historically disadvantaged groups, including Indigenous communities, racial minorities, and low-income populations.

She added that environmental justice means that no one should be unfairly exposed to dangerous pollution or natural disasters, regardless of their social position. It involves identifying inequalities and providing the necessary support to achieve equity. Collaboration with Mexico and the United States through the CEC offers a unique platform to address environmental justice from a North American perspective, promoting dialogue across the region. Canada’s approach to environmental justice places a strong emphasis on meaningful community participation. The government listens to those affected, consults with communities, and ensures that their experiences and knowledge are included into and guide environmental decision-making processes. This collaborative approach aims to create a more just and sustainable North America.

Finally, ADM McCardell reflected on Canada implementing the United Nations on the Rights of Indigenous People to recognize and respect the human rights of Indigenous Peoples. This charts the way forward in building a renewed nation-to-nation Inuit crown and government-to-government relationship based on the affirmation of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership. The early efforts to develop an environmental justice strategy in Canada will focus on the co-development of a plan to engage Indigenous Peoples that recognizes the current consultation burden on Indigenous rights holders and ensures that they have time and space to participate in the engagement process. She concluded by emphasizing that Canada looks forward to collaborating with all stakeholders, Mexico and the United States, and with the assistance of the CEC Secretariat, in important dialogues centered on environmental justice. Finally, she stated that Canada will continue working in collaboration with

Mexico and the United States, and with the assistance of the Secretariat, to achieve a more environmentally just North America.

The facilitator thanked ADM McCardell and turned to Undersecretary Rico, inviting him to share what the Mexican government is doing to address environmental justice in Mexico.

Undersecretary Rico began by mentioning that environmental justice has emerged as a critical and timely topic, which aligns well with the ongoing efforts by the CEC and reflects the significant strides made by Mexico in this domain. He said that Mexico's commitment to environmental justice is embedded within its constitutional framework, where the right to a healthy environment is recognized. This commitment is further bolstered by Mexico's participation in international agreements, such as the Escazú Agreement, which focuses on the protection of environmental defenders and the enhancement of access to information and environmental justice. Another initiative is a constitutional reform proposed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador last February which would amend the Constitution so that Indigenous Peoples of Mexico's original communities become subjects of public law/rights with priority attention.

Undersecretary Rico mentioned five specific initiatives to underscore Mexico's efforts in advancing environmental justice. First, the development of eleven justice plans with Indigenous communities, which demonstrates the government's commitment to addressing environmental, social, territorial, and educational issues. These plans aim to restore the historical rights of Indigenous communities, with the Yaqui community being a notable example. Another element is the environmental assessments conducted by the Mexican government in emblematic cases such as mining in Sonora or in the case of damages to the affected communities by the pork industry in Yucatán, and others that have allowed communities to have technical elements and certainty of the environmental damages in their communities. These assessments empower communities to defend their rights legally in jurisdictional processes.

A third element is the decree that has been signed to recognize, protect, and preserve the sacred places and pilgrimage routes of several Indigenous Peoples. This is part of the Presidential Commission that oversees compliance. It is important to recognize and safeguard the traditions of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico.

Fourth, the cleanup and closure of the dump known as "Las Matas," which was a longstanding environmental problem in the State of Veracruz. For decades, three major cities had informally agreed to dump their respective waste in one massive landfill, causing significant environmental harm, and affected a RAMSAR wetland site. He noted that the issue of "Las Matas" has finally been addressed after 20 years, demonstrating the government's commitment to managing solid waste responsibly.

Finally, in the State of Sonora, coordinated efforts of cleaning and environmental education actions with traditional authorities of the Seri Comcaac community, and all levels of government have addressed the improper management of solid waste in Mexico.

He concluded by stating that Mexico works with a new vision of closeness to communities; they place life at the center; the environment is directly related to life; water issues, flora, fauna are directly related to life, and that is how they address socio-environmental problems.

Mr. Taillant thanked the Council members for the great examples they provided and then invited the Chair of the CEC's Joint Public Advisory Committee, Esteban Escamilla Prado, to come to the podium and report to the JPAC public forum of June 24 on *Advancing Environmental Justice in North America*.



## **Report from the JPAC public forum on *Advancing Environmental Justice in North America* by the JPAC Chair**

JPAC Chair Esteban Escamilla Prado began by saying he was honored to be present at this session to share the key points from the JPAC Public Forum held on 24 June, which focused on *Advancing Environmental Justice in North America*. He expressed gratitude to all the panelists for their important contributions and thanked both the in-person and online participants for their engagement throughout the day. He highlighted that the forum explored various dimensions of environmental justice in Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

He said that Amelia Monteros had delivered a powerful opening, emphasizing the historical environmental injustices and resilience of communities in the Wilmington region. Her intervention was followed by the CEC Executive Director, who underscored the need for an intersectional approach to address environmental justice challenges across the three countries.

The JPAC Public forum also benefitted from the participation of Diandra Esparza, keynote speaker and executive director of Intersectional Environmentalist, who stressed the importance of integrating intersectionality into environmental protection efforts and outlined three key points toward achieving environmental justice:

1. Integrate the voices of communities most affected by environmental injustices through education and awareness about the importance of environmental conservation and the access and promotion of environmental justice, ensuring access to tools and funding for communities to develop solutions to their challenges.
2. Create new guidelines to address historical and environmental injustices, including discrimination against Indigenous peoples and the marginalization of people with intersectional identities. This involves implementing policies to protect our ability to develop community-centered solutions and strengthen the enforcement of laws and regulations that address environmental injustices.
3. Adopt intersectional approaches in research and data collection activities to map and identify needs and opportunities, develop tailored solutions, and adopt a new language that fosters new narratives.

Her keynote was followed by the first panel, on *Legal and Policy Instruments for Environmental Justice in North America*, which featured experts who shared strategies and experiences from Canada, Mexico, and the United States. The session included insights into accessing legal resources and promoting education and public participation in environmental decision-making. Additionally, Paolo Solano, Director of Legal Affairs and SEM Unit, presented the SEM process and the status of submissions related to the effective enforcement of environmental legislation submitted to the CEC.

Highlights from this panel included:

- Ensuring access to legal resources, such as the CEC's SEM process and others, as tools to obtain information about possible omissions in the effective enforcement of environmental legislation, identify barriers to its enforcement, and offer instruments to resolve disputes and protect environmental defenders.

- Providing education to raise awareness, empower communities, promote equitable policies, reinforce the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations, and encourage sustainable practices.
- Integrating environmental justice into public policies to protect historically marginalized communities by strengthening environmental laws, providing technical guidance, and developing tools for impact assessments.
- Promoting public participation of historically marginalized communities in decision-making processes, ensuring their contribution and involvement in the formulation and implementation of solutions.

The second session of the JPAC Public Forum, on *Community Mobilization and Challenges in Environmental Justice*, discussed the principles of environmental justice through community examples, highlighting current environmental justice challenges in Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

Key points included:

- Recognizing historical systemic discriminations, such as racism and colonialism, and their impacts on communities.
- Recognizing the overexploitation of natural resources and the persistence of extractivism, even in environmental strategies like the energy transition, which can cause significant environmental and social damage, including devastated landscapes, contaminated water sources, reduced biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions, and in some cases, human rights violations and displacement of populations, including Indigenous communities.
- Implementing regional approaches, strategies, and policies that address the multiple consequences of discrimination, especially of Indigenous and rural communities, proposed directly by the communities and Indigenous Peoples.
- Supporting awareness and organization efforts, including youth perspectives, and increasing funding for environmental education in formal education systems to strengthen community resilience and mobilize voices for environmental protection.
- Building networks and alliances to share stories, inspire, and empower communities to mobilize for their rights and bring hope.
- Conceiving new economic development strategies that prioritize environmental and biodiversity protection and promote responsible and sustainable practices in the private sector.

In conclusion, JPAC Chair Esteban Escamilla Prado mentioned ongoing efforts to draft recommendations to the Council based on the forum's discussions, with a detailed summary soon to be available on the CEC website.

Mr. Taillant thanked Mr. Escamilla and then invited Professor La'Meshia Whittington, moderator of the 25 June Youth Panel on *Bridging the Gap: A Conversation on the Generational Fight for Environmental Justice*, to come to the podium and share key highlights from that event.

**Report from the Youth Panel “Bridging the Gap: A conversation on the Generational Fight for Environmental Justice”**

Professor Whittington introduced herself and the work of Democracy Green, presenting successful efforts in North Carolina and nationwide. She then mentioned the names of youth panelists who joined from each country and indicated they were joined by Dr. Benjamin Chavis. She explained that the youth panel's dynamic discussion led to the emergence of a series of actionable steps reflecting the need to advance environmental justice throughout North America and the world.

She explained that the discussion emphasized the importance of understanding historical context and learning from past leaders within communities. Learning from the efforts and leaders of previous movements allows youth to receive valuable insights while also contributing their own knowledge and innovations. It is crucial to honor the cycle of reciprocity by giving and receiving knowledge, recognizing that everyone has something valuable to contribute.

Professor Whittington explained that effective movements are driven by the consent and engagement of the communities they aim to help. It is vital to understand that those advocating for marginalized groups are often part of these communities themselves, working alongside allies to benefit their people.

She explained that current policies addressing climate-related issues, such as hurricane damage and flooding, are inadequate and require stronger enforcement mechanisms. Rural and unincorporated communities frequently face insufficient funding and support, highlighting the need for more comprehensive policy approaches. The gaps are not only between countries but also between urban and rural areas within regions.

Then, she mentioned that enforcement is a key issue. Mechanisms must be in place to specify which department or agency is responsible for policy implementation, ensure adequate funding, and establish a dedicated body to drive the initiatives forward.

She stated there was a consensus among panelists that social media has become more of a negative and antagonistic medium, and that it does not accurately reflect the movement or leaders on the ground who are creating an unequal distribution of hierarchical power of advocacy. This trend raises concerns about whether social media accurately reflects the true nature of activism.

Professor Whittington explained that technological and infrastructure challenges are also significant. Many communities struggle with outdated technology and infrastructure, which worsens the impact of extreme weather events. To effectively address issues, new technologies like clean energy solutions must be complemented by necessary infrastructure upgrades.

She also explained that activists and community members face increased risks of violence while addressing environmental and social issues. There is a pressing need for stronger security measures to protect those working on the front lines. Lastly, she explained that acknowledging and addressing the trauma experienced by activists and communities is crucial. It is important to ensure that their struggles and testimonies are central to the movement's narrative and that they are not dehumanized in the process.

The facilitator thanked Professor Whittington and then reported on the 25 June experts' roundtable on *Environmental Justice: Origins, Evolution, and Emerging Policy in North America*, and provided key highlights.

## **Report from the Experts' Roundtable with the Executive Director on “Environmental Justice: Origins, Evolution, and Emerging Policy in North America”**

Mr. Taillant began by stating that the roundtable focused on past, present and emerging efforts to promote environmental justice in North America, particularly in the context of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. The panel reflected on how environmental justice actions (such as improving access to information, promoting meaningful participation and the passage of specific environmental justice laws, policies and programs) can help tackle environmental inequities suffered by historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

Mr. Taillant felt that the roundtable on environmental justice in the three countries has led to a great exchange, with a fantastic dialogue that covered the evolution and history of the movement. The discussion centered on a deep dive into the term itself, as a social movement and public policy aspiration for affected communities, especially underserved, disadvantaged, or discriminated communities. The exploration of environmental justice has extended to an examination of its implications in the United States, Canada, and Mexico through the lens of human rights, which is often a necessary perspective. This examination included the evolution of human rights law and environmental treaties and agreements, discovering its relevance internationally, particularly through the Rio Convention's Principle 10, Europe's Aarhus Convention, and the Americas' Escazú Agreement, which emphasizes access to information, participation, and justice. These are procedural pillars of environmental justice that have become universally accepted, he added.

He noted that the term "environmental justice" dates to the 1960s and 1970s, when workers affected by toxic pollution in their workplaces sought access to information, healthcare, standards, law enforcement, and compensation. This is where the beginnings of the environmental justice movement occurred. He continued by mentioning the context of when this happened.

He added that this panel was about three countries trying to look at environmental justice through a common lens. A few key points emerged: Environmental justice is complex, with many definitions and varying historical, political, and social contexts depending on where it manifests. There are diverse manifestations of environmental justice, and different issues are labeled as environmental justice, but common themes unite these discussions and this important. This commonality is crucial for maintaining focus on the topic, preventing all environmental problems from being classified as environmental justice. Issues such as inequity, discrimination, fairness, race, and colonialism are integral to environmental justice.

He noted that environmental justice will take different directions and cross different issues. This panel aimed to explore where the environmental justice movement is going. It may not be called environmental justice in every struggle, space, community, country, or society, but if it is about equity, fairness, and nondiscrimination of environmental resources and pollution, it is about environmental justice.

Mr. Taillant emphasized that environmental justice is fundamentally about health and people. It concerns how pollution affects individuals, particularly specific populations and places. The significance of neighborhoods, where people live, where children go to school, and where they play is crucial to understanding environmental justice. Maps are important tools for visualizing the relationship between pollution and where people live, highlighting issues such as extreme heat, flooding, drought, food deserts, and traffic-related pollution.

The importance of bottom-up engagement was stressed throughout the panel and the entire Council Session. Engagement should be community-led and community-defined, with autonomy and self-determination playing critical roles. In addition, words, policies, and laws matter, he said.

Mr. Taillant underlined that Indigenous environmental justice, different but integral, defined by colonization and the struggles of Indigenous Peoples and communities, follows unique pathways in the environmental justice discussion. Simply tweaking colonial structures is not the goal. Systemic and historical inequities must be deconstructed and rebuilt from the ground up. Inclusion and intersectionality are key and part of this formula. Overall, he mentioned that the importance of this discussion on environmental justice is not only reminding what has already been said but also focusing on emerging issues such as climate justice, youth justice, intergenerational justice, gender justice, immigrant justice, and energy justice to add to the history of environmental justice.

He concluded by saying that we must not seek permission to challenge historical and systemic ways of doing things, and closed with Isaac Newton's law of motion, which states that if something is put in motion, it will continue in the same direction unless a force acts upon it to change its direction. We must act if we want to change the direction of environmental injustice, and the CEC is a great place to do this.

### **Presentation by three invited experts on three questions and a moderated exchange between Council members, invited experts and registered participants**

The facilitator, Mr. Taillant, turned to the invited experts from Canada, Mexico and the United States to hear their perspectives. He reminded everyone that the central focus of the discussion is environmental justice and community empowerment. He then recognized that each of the invited experts come from quite different backgrounds with impressive sets of personal and professional experiences on the issue.

He first asked William Barber III (from the United States) to answer the following question:

*As you know, adequate financing for advocacy can be inconsistent and often a moving target, according to funding source priorities. We've heard about this funding issue across the board. Local groups often have difficulty financing the actions that they want and need to advance EJ actions. How is your organization approaching funding challenges in order to mobilize public or private capital to ensure that communities are improving their environment, creating a safer, more healthy and sustainable environment, and benefiting from economic development? What advice can you give to other organizations on how to successfully obtain the resources they need to build long-term sustainability?*

William Barber III explained that we find ourselves at a crucial juncture in US history, particularly concerning climate transition and environmental justice. Recent legislative efforts and investments have brought us to this pivotal moment. Since 2021, significant advancements have been made through three major pieces of legislation aimed at directing capital toward green technologies:

1. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021: This legislation allocated funding to improve mass transit systems and enhance infrastructure for water and sewer services.
2. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021: This act provided resources for infrastructure projects, including electric vehicle charging stations, upgrades to transmission and distribution systems, and improvements in building electrification and efficiency.

3. The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA): This act focuses on climate objectives with a notable allocation of \$20 billion from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. This fund supports green bank financing and creates incentives for investing in disadvantaged communities. Importantly, at least 40% of this funding is targeted specifically toward low-income and disadvantaged communities to support projects that reduce or prevent greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution.

He explained that this momentum in green legislation is driven by decades of grassroots activism. The challenge now is to ensure that green financing and community engagement intersect constructively. The goal is to align environmental justice with the benefits of green technologies, ensuring they are distributed equitably.

Mr. Barber III emphasized that integrating environmental justice objectives and setting a 2050 net-zero deadline enables green bank financing to expand creatively and effectively. He stressed the need for specialized knowledge, community engagement, green financing, community outreach and education, and proven strategies to drive clean technology adoption.

He explained that the Coalition of Green Capital (CGC), where he works, plays a critical role in this transition. As a nonprofit organization, CGC is dedicated to accelerating investment in clean energy technologies through Green Bank financing. Green Banks are a proven financial model that leverages public and philanthropic funds to attract private investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and decarbonization technologies. Over the past decade, they have led the Green Bank movement both nationally and internationally, working to increase investment and accelerate the development of clean power.

He mentioned that recently, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) made a significant step by capitalizing the first US national Green Bank through the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund program. CGC was awarded US\$5 billion to capitalize this national Green Bank and an additional \$125 million to establish Green Banks and to promote solar development.

Mr. Barber explained that their approach at CGC is big, visionary and inclusive. They envision a shift from a top-down, trickle-down approach to energy benefits toward a more inclusive model. This means spreading the benefits of clean energy production equitably across all communities. Their strategy involves not only advancing clean energy but ensuring that the transition is achieved with and for the communities most affected. This includes consulting local leaders and incorporating their needs into policy and project development.

He explained that their priorities include ensuring equitable access to reliable, clean, and affordable energy, up-skilling and re-skilling the energy workforce, and fostering leadership and entrepreneurship in the energy sector. He shared that they also focus on generating and analyzing data to measure the positive impacts of various technologies, ensuring that these efforts are effective and beneficial.

For organizations looking to tap into these funding opportunities and build long-term sustainability, Mr. Barber offered the following advice:

1. Understand federal programs: research the available federal loan programs and their specific eligibility requirements.
2. Eligibility criteria: ensure that communities are aware of the requirements, including organizational type, mission alignment, project purpose, and financial prerequisites.

3. Organizational preparedness: Develop clear and legal entities, such as nonprofits, with trained boards and strategic planning capabilities. This ensures that projects are fundable, scalable, and effectively managed.

In conclusion, he explained that the transition to a clean energy future involves a concerted effort to integrate green financing with community engagement, ensuring that benefits are broadly shared and that the needs of disadvantaged communities are met.

The facilitator thanked Mr. Barber for this answer and shared questions that he had received from the public. He asked the panelists to try to provide answers to these questions during their interventions:

*What opportunities exist for the three countries to work collaboratively to minimize the impacts that companies have from one country on neighboring countries?*

*How do you plan to assess and plan the deployment of renewable energy and material needs for the current energy transition to avoid the impact on Indigenous peoples and territories?*

Then, the facilitator turned to Fe de Leon (from Canada) and asked her the following question:

*What are some of the successful examples of how your organization has utilized educational programs, outreach efforts and public and private funding to create solutions that address specific community environmental justice challenges?*

Ms. de Leon began by noting that the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), her organization, has been championing equity issues since its inception in 1970. For 30 years, this unique organization has operated as a legal aid clinic, primarily funded through Legal Aid Ontario. This funding structure allows CELA to participate in crucial meetings and undertake extensive work in environmental justice.

The association's primary focus has been to protect and advocate the protection of public health and the environment and it does so in different ways, focusing on two strategic priorities: ensuring access to environmental justice and preventing pollution to safeguard public health and the environment. These goals are achieved through public legal education, law reform, and (primarily) legal representation for low-income and disadvantaged groups.

Although CELA has not always explicitly used the term "environmental justice," its work has consistently addressed inequities. Ms. de Leon provided a notable example of their law reform efforts: the Walkerton Inquiry. In 2000, the small community of Walkerton, Ontario, experienced a tragic E. coli contamination of its local well system, resulting in seven deaths in the community. This event highlighted the detrimental effects of years of deregulation on Ontario's drinking water sources.

In response, CELA committed significant resources to represent the affected community during the inquiry. This dedication led to changes in laws protecting drinking water sources and addressing pollution from nearby farmland. The organization recognized the tragedy's impact and responded by engaging directly with the community. They established representation in hearings, helping to create a space for discussions about the inequities faced by certain communities. This effort involved years of work to ensure laws were implemented to protect future generations.

She added that beyond specific cases like Walkerton, CELA actively supports communities facing environmental pollution challenges by providing legal tools and opportunities for understanding and addressing these issues. CELA engages with communities through public invitations and educational

sessions and develops groundbreaking papers to highlight problems and propose solutions, relying on additional funding beyond their support from Legal Aid Ontario. They also seek extra funding to encourage marginalized communities' engagement because they want those people to become actively involved in these conversations.

Environmental justice, as addressed by CELA, involves recognizing and rectifying systemic inequities that disproportionately affect certain communities. As Ms. de Leon reaffirmed, CELA is not reaching everyone that they need to reach. To expand their reach, CELA uses mapping tools to identify areas requiring attention and collaborates with general legal clinics to extend their expertise. She noted that the reality is the people who may not know that CELA exists are still facing the same injustices, whether it is in social housing, poor labor conditions with extreme heat, or in areas like waste and toxic chemicals. It is about understanding what we are being exposed to.

Ms. de Leon concluded that integrating different key elements into the environmental justice conversation and finding solutions for marginalized communities is crucial. She emphasized that the new Canadian law that just passed will be an important aspect in determining how to bring these communities to the table and create space for their involvement.

Mr. Taillant thanked Ms. de Leon and mentioned that questions kept coming in from the public and that he would address two more. He explained that they might not be able to get to all of them, but that he would take responsibility for answering each question that was received from the public. Thus, he explained that if anyone was listening online and felt that their question had not been answered, they should please send it directly to him at [ej@cec.org](mailto:ej@cec.org) and he would commit to responding to all questions personally. The questions from the public were:

*How can governments and industry meaningfully engage and what mechanisms or approaches could empower communities?*

*Regarding the link between biodiversity and EJ, how this link should play out in our work and in everything we do?*

Mr. Taillant turned to the last invited expert, Emiliano Reyes (of Mexico), and recognized him as a great example of youth engagement in climate action in Mexico and North America. He asked him the following question:

*I would like for you to share with us how you think that environmental justice and community empowerment can be strengthened in Mexico and, thinking more generally and building upon this international and regional experience that you have, what roles do international organizations and corporations need to play in this process?*

Mr. Reyes began by thanking the CEC, the Governments of the United States, Canada, and Mexico for placing environmental justice at the forefront of this forum. It is crucial to advance in protecting our common home: Mother Earth, our cryosphere, atmosphere, and biosphere, he said.

He began by mentioning that the crises we are experiencing cannot be solved in isolation. We must envision them as interconnected, and international cooperation and regional cooperation in North America are essential to address the climate emergency, biodiversity collapse, pollution, and desertification effectively. We are at a key political moment and it offers us the opportunity to strengthen the environmental agenda. We must imagine and co-create new futures, with new ideas that incorporate environmental justice into all our actions related to environmental and climate issues, he continued.



He emphasized that environmental justice is not just a methodological tool for inclusion; it must be the vision that guides all our actions. Public policies, governance, and laws in the three countries and globally must address the structural inequalities related to environmental issues.

Mr. Reyes highlighted three concepts with specific solutions to inspire the work of the CEC and the region:

1. **Intersectionality:** It is crucial to consider that there are systems of oppression that marginalize different communities, based on gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, age, abilities, migratory status, among others. Environmental and climate policies and actions must consider these vulnerabilities to ensure justice for historically marginalized communities.
2. **Just Transition:** To transform socio-economic systems towards climate neutrality with resilience, it is necessary to repair relationships with people and put nature at the forefront. Examples such as rights of nature and democratization of energy are key to equitably distributing the benefits of these transitions.
3. **Intergenerational Equity:** The actions we take today will profoundly impact the future of coming generations. It is crucial to empower youth with the tools and vision to create sustainable futures. Local actions must trust and empower youth to actively participate in creating technical and policy solutions.

Mr. Reyes concluded by acknowledging the challenge of remaining optimistic in the face of global challenges, but we must not lose hope for creating a better future. Equity, connections, and empowerment are fundamental to co-creating the sustainable future we want to see, he said.

After a short break, Mr. Taillant turned to the audience and reiterated that members of the public could send their questions to [ej@cec.org](mailto:ej@cec.org) and that the CEC would respond promptly.

## **CEC'S 30-YEAR ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION**

### **Introductory remarks by narrator**

Mr. Taillant invited Caitlin McCoy, a young member of the CEC Secretariat staff to come up on the stage and highlight the organization's remarkable journey and achievements since 1994.

### **Showcasing successful and reproducible projects from the last 30 years**

This segment showcased a range of successful and reproducible projects that have been implemented by the CEC over the past 30 years. These projects served as examples of the innovative and impactful work that the CEC has undertaken in various fields and highlighted the organization's remarkable journey and achievements. The interactive session included narration, historic images and videos. The work presented included the nearly 30 years of monarch conservation, the groundbreaking work to tackle food loss and food waste, and the CEC's role in catalyzing action to phase out and manage harmful chemicals, such as DDT, mercury, and lead acid in batteries in North America.

After the presentation of the video, Daniel Taillant recognized the work of different actors that are involved in the work of the CEC.

## **COUNCIL ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **Trilateral announcements**

CEC Executive Director Taillant then invited the Council members to make the Council Session announcements.

DA McCabe announced the new EJ4Climate cycle and Council initiative.

### **Fourth cycle of EJ4Climate grant program**

DA McCabe stated she was excited to announce that the CEC will be launching a fourth cycle of the EJ4Climate grant program in fall 2024 with US\$1.5 million. She explained that, initiated by the US Environmental Protection Agency in 2021, the CEC had established this grant program to fund projects that support underserved and vulnerable communities, and Indigenous communities, in Canada, Mexico and the United States to prepare for climate-related impacts. This program provides funding directly to community-based organizations to help develop community-driven solutions to adapt to address environmental and human health vulnerabilities, including those due to climate change impacts.

She said that this year's cycle will address the theme of "Community-led educational programs to increase environmental justice and climate adaptation knowledge." Including this year's cycle, the total grant funding over the past four years will now amount to an impressive US\$7.5 million.

She concluded by explaining that the call for proposals will be launched in October 2024 and, based on the outstanding submissions that the CEC had received over the past three cycles, she is really looking forward to announcing a new group of exceptional projects.

### **The North American Environmental Justice Action Center (NAEJAC)**

DA McCabe explained that this C\$500,000 initiative will create a North American Environmental Justice Action Center (NAEJAC). The NAEJAC will promote and leverage equitable environmental and climate resilience and environmental justice (EJ) actions across North America. She explained that the NAEJAC will offer a platform and space to share knowledge and exchange ideas on environmental justice, work with environmental justice leaders and EJ-impacted communities, and build a roster of environmental justice experts who could help in providing guidance and advice when called upon. Finally, she mentioned that the NAEJAC will also include examples of replicable environmental justice actions and best practices across the United States, Mexico and Canada to assist in strengthening the capacity of local, Indigenous and vulnerable communities across North America.

ADM McCardell announced two new projects that will be initiated in 2024:

### **Designing and Conducting an Outreach Campaign at the 2026 World Cup**

ADM McCardell explained that this C\$200,000 project aims to educate citizens on food waste reduction via the biggest sporting event in history. The CEC has developed key resources to help tackle food loss and waste (FLW) across North America. With the upcoming 2026 World Cup, the CEC has an opportunity to lead an outreach campaign to reach citizens from throughout North America, highlighting the issue of food waste and opportunities for fans to reduce it. The CEC will develop a toolkit for partners to use leading up to and during the World Cup containing guidance, messaging, and materials. The toolkit will be delivered throughout venues and host cities, and via

social media and in partnership with FIFA, the Green Sports Alliance, other NGOs, national and local governments, and influencers. The toolkit will provide host cities with a much-needed resource focusing on citizen engagement and outreach in support of broader zero waste and materials management goals. This effort supports the World Cup goal of 50% reduction in carbon emissions, three countries' food loss and waste reduction goals, and the international Sustainable Development Goal Target 12.3.

### **Sharing Best Practices for Environmentally Sound Management of Used Lead Acid Batteries**

ADM McCardell shared that this C\$50,000 project will assess the impact of CEC guidance on the environmentally sound management of spent lead acid batteries (SLABs), which was published in 2016. It will identify the best practices outlined in the guidance that are being used in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. The project will collect information about SLABs management practices and policies and then disseminate this information to relevant stakeholders.

Undersecretary Rico announced the following projects that will be initiated in 2024:

### **Continuation of the CEC project to modernize the Notice and Consent Electronic Data Exchange (NCEDE) system that exchanges data on hazardous waste cross-border transfers**

Undersecretary Rico explained that this C\$100,000 project is a continuation of the CEC project *Modernizing the Data Exchange System for Hazardous Waste Transfers* to modernize the Notice and Consent Electronic Data Exchange (NCEDE) system for the exchange of data on hazardous waste cross-border transfers. He explained that this initiative will enable experts from the three countries to build upon the actions from projects that were completed in 2021 and 2023. He also mentioned that in previous editions, significant progress was made in strengthening and modernizing data exchange in the region. This was achieved through the analysis of laws and regulations related to the import, export, and transportation of hazardous waste and materials.

He explained that this new project will contribute to enhancing regional efforts to meet international commitments, such as those under the Basel Convention. It aims to facilitate the development of unified protocols for exchanging notices and consent before hazardous waste shipments cross national borders.

Undersecretary Rico emphasized that this issue has substantial implications for both public health and environmental protection, particularly for vulnerable populations that are most exposed to these pollutants. Supporting such actions is crucial for improving control over the movement of hazardous substances. As a result of this project, Mexico is expected to bolster its internal capabilities through the maintenance and updating of its information system. More importantly, the trilateral dialogue among experts from the three countries will reinforce the system in North America.

### **Support to the Monarch Butterfly Trilateral Scientific Group**

Undersecretary Rico described his C\$140,000 project to strengthen conservation efforts for the most iconic species in North America, the monarch butterfly, with support and collaboration in evidence collection under the leadership of the Trilateral Association for Monarch Butterfly Conservation.

He highlighted that such actions of shared responsibility and synergy among regional governments, community involvement, Indigenous knowledge and practices, scientific and technical bodies, and society as a whole, are crucial. These efforts enhance trilateral actions to advance wildlife preservation, sustainable use of ecosystems, and biodiversity, while reinforcing the right to a healthy

environment. He congratulated the initiative and wished success to the Committee and its collaborators in their forthcoming work.

## **COUNCIL SESSION FINAL REMARKS AND CLOSING**

Mr. Taillant thanked the Council members for their unwavering support in promoting the region's environmental goals. He acknowledged that we, at the Secretariat, are delighted about these announcements and particularly those that will continue supporting environmental justice for years to come. They are very well aligned, he felt, with some of the issues and needs we have been hearing about over the last three days, and we will be excited to begin implementing them.

Mr. Taillant then invited the Council to move to the table and sign the official Council Statement that captures the outcomes and commitments of the meeting.

ADM McCardell expressed profound gratitude to everyone involved in the important Council discussions held that day. She highlighted that a statement was signed, summarizing the exceptional work accomplished over the past days.

She emphasized that the Council sessions offered a valuable opportunity for Canada, the United States, and Mexico to strengthen their collaboration on environmental issues and, crucially, to engage with the communities within each country. She underscored her belief that the three nations are defined by their people and praised the extraordinary participation of the TEKEG and JPAC members in the Council Session, as well as the impactful panels on environmental justice.

She conveyed pride in the collective contribution toward continent-wide efforts to address environmental justice. In her concluding remarks, ADM McCardell extended heartfelt congratulations and thanks to the CEC Secretariat for their remarkable work, acknowledging Daniel Taillant's leadership and expressing appreciation for his work.

DA McCabe then expressed her deep satisfaction in being part of these days' discussions. She acknowledged that the recent sessions represent only a fraction of the extensive work carried out throughout the year by participants from the three countries.

ADM McCabe highlighted the personal joy she experienced working with North American leaders and noted the enduring relationships formed through years of collaboration. She commended the productive year, emphasizing the shared efforts to enhance environmental justice across North America through a comprehensive trilateral agenda. This included engaging with climate-vulnerable and historically marginalized communities to advance solutions on climate change mitigation and promote green growth and sustainable communities and ecosystems.

She observed that despite focusing on national efforts, it became evident that the neighboring countries were addressing similar issues, showcasing the strength of their partnership and common objectives. This year's Council Session, with its theme, "Strengthening Environmental Justice through Community Empowerment," focused on empowering communities across North America, many of which are already actively guiding the direction of these efforts.

DA McCabe celebrated the 30th anniversary of this collaboration between the Governments of Canada, Mexico, and the United States, recognizing it as a significant milestone. She reflected on the longevity of this partnership as a testament to its effectiveness and enduring relevance, noting that such long-lasting government programs are rare and indicative of their successful execution.

Reflecting on the lessons learned over three decades, DA McCabe emphasized that cooperation is essential for sustainability. She praised the CEC for achieving significant results through collective effort, benefiting the shared North American environment.

She extended her gratitude to the Alternate Representatives, the General Standing Committee, the CEC Secretariat, JPAC, the TEKEG, and everyone who contributed to the success of the meetings. Special thanks were given to Daniel for his exceptional leadership and smooth hosting of the session. McCabe also acknowledged the behind-the-scenes teams for their meticulous planning, noting that their efforts ensured a seamless experience despite any challenges.

Looking ahead, DA McCabe expressed enthusiasm for continuing to strengthen environmental cooperation between the United States, Mexico, and Canada through the CEC in the coming years. She concluded by anticipating the transition of Council Session leadership to Mexico and looking forward to the next meeting in Mexico.

Undersecretary Rico began by extending his heartfelt congratulations and gratitude to the United States government, specifically to Administrator Regan, DA McCabe, US Alternate Representative Jane Nishida and their entire team, for successfully concluding their presidency and this Council Session.

He noted that this trilateral forum not only reaffirms the commitment to the region's communities but also renews the cooperative spirit that highlights the success of the CEC as an environmental mechanism within the ambitious and modern USMCA trade agreement.

Undersecretary Rico emphasized that the CEC is a unique and innovative mechanism, fostering interaction among high-level officials from the three governments, civil society, and academia. He highlighted that the bonds of cooperation, strengthened over the past 30 years, will continue to be reinforced annually.

Looking ahead, he expressed hope that the announced projects will further support the countries' efforts to enhance their environmental problem-solving capabilities and that these will be implemented successfully.

He applauded the Joint Public Advisory Committee and the TEKEG for their good coordination, noting their role in enriching the CEC's cooperative work proposals and suggesting additional activities.

Undersecretary Rico acknowledged that the various approaches to environmental justice discussed during the session will aid in the comprehensive involvement of Indigenous and local communities, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant actors in preserving natural resources.

He recognized the significant progress made by the CEC in strengthening the critical role of Indigenous communities in environmental protection, valuing their traditional knowledge, which is essential amid the current planetary crises.

Undersecretary Rico commended the CEC's commitment to engaging youth, noting their active involvement through the GELP, which keeps the CEC at the forefront with innovative approaches. On behalf of Mexico, he reaffirmed their commitment to work diligently with the Secretariat to conclude the current Strategic Plan 2021–2025 and develop the next one.

As Mexico takes on the presidency of the CEC, Undersecretary Rico conveyed the country's honor in leading the Thirty-Second Regular Session of the CEC Council in June 2025, and inviting everyone to Mexico with much anticipation.

He concluded with a heartfelt thank you.

The meeting was adjourned.