

From Testimony to Action:

Key Issues & Next Steps from the North Carolina People's Hearing

A synthesis of main themes and action items prepared by the research team at the Tishman Environment and Design Center, with contributions from the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network

Introduction

North Carolina (NC) holds a unique and pivotal place in the history of the environmental justice (EJ) movement. In 1982, residents of Warren County, a predominantly Black and working-class community, sparked what is now widely recognized as the birth of the modern EJ movement when they protested the siting of hazardous polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) waste in their neighborhood. Today, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and low-wealth communities across NC continue to bear disproportionate environmental and climate burdens such as industrial agriculture, coal ash disposal, toxic pollution, and inadequate flood protection and recovery, rooted in systemic disinvestment and inequitable policymaking.

Building on the legacy of grassroots resistance and the power of local organizing to spark national change, the NC People's Hearing, held June 10-11, 2025, in Greensboro, brought together nearly 500 frontline residents, EJ advocates, and organizers to bear witness, share lived experiences, and elevate community-driven solutions to environmental injustices. Hosted by the People's Environmental Justice Advisory Council (PEJAC), co-organized by the NC Environmental Justice Network, NC Climate Justice Collective, and the NC Disaster Response and Resilience Network, and grounded in the historical significance of Greensboro and the civil rights movement, the two-day gathering commenced with Haliwa Saponi elder welcoming all to the land, and combined public testimony, community groundings, and policy dialogue to amplify the voices of those most affected by environmental harm, with 130 attendees signed up to speak. The program featured cultural performances, breakout sessions, organizing strategies, and planning for future People's Hearings. Beyond testimony, the hearing provided a model for bottom-up governance and organizing, generating concrete recommendations for state and local policy, as well as networking opportunities and next steps.

Purpose: This document offers a high-level synthesis of the EJ and climate issues and key calls to action that surfaced from testimonies at the People's Hearing. Advocates called for systemic reforms that center on community ownership, accountability, and justice across environmental, energy, labor, land-use, and public health systems. They also emphasized the need to shift power to frontline communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and rural populations, by advancing state and local policies that ensure environmental protection, economic equity, participatory governance, and the restoration of Indigenous land and leadership.

Method: Over 80 public testimonies were video recorded and shared across three hearing sessions, supported by real-time documentation, interpretation, and participatory GIS mapping by notetakers from the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network (NCEJN), the Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School, and a team of volunteers coming from Michigan. The ten priority issue areas presented in this document were primarily developed through a classification and thematic analysis of these testimonies by the Tishman Center's research team. Five additional priority issues were identified in the testimonies by NCEJN and are shared in Appendix A. Select testimonies and quotes were used to illustrate key calls to action, which, although non-exhaustive, highlighted common themes expressed throughout the hearing. This methodology centers lived experience as a core data source and affirms grassroots leadership in shaping environmental and climate justice policies and action.

Summary Table of Key Priority Areas and Actions

Priority Issue	Summary	Key Calls to Action
Legacy Pollution & Cumulative Impacts	Decades of industrial pollution, including PFAS, PCBs, coal ash, and CAFO waste, have created toxic living conditions, especially in BIPOC and low-income communities. Despite the severe physical and mental health consequences, regulatory enforcement remains weak and corporate accountability scarce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remediate contaminated sites & fully restore affected communities. • Reform permitting frameworks to require permit denials on the basis of cumulative impacts. • Enforce accountability for industrial polluters.
Equitable Infrastructure & Land Use	Discriminatory zoning and infrastructure development have concentrated polluting industries and harmful land uses in BIPOC and low-income communities. These decisions have led to health risks, displacement, and disinvestment, often without meaningful community input or protection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable community input to shape zoning & land use decisions. • Enforce legal compliance for land use policies. • Expand community-owned infrastructure models for both physical and digital infrastructure.
Climate Resilience & Adaptation	Frontline communities are experiencing more frequent and severe climate disasters, such as flooding, hurricanes, and extreme heat, which are exacerbated by disinvestment and aging infrastructure. Long-underserved neighborhoods face the greatest risks and are often excluded from emergency planning and recovery efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund community-led climate preparedness & recovery networks. • Ensure emergency planning is accountable & transparent. • Invest in trauma-informed care & cultural preservation.
Just & Renewable Energy Systems	Harmful energy development, including methane pipelines, industrial wood pellet production, and biogas from factory farms, poses threats to land, air, and public health. There is limited access to affordable, renewable energy, and the current energy system perpetuates toxic waste cycles and exacerbates racial and economic inequities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift energy ownership to communities. • Stop false climate solutions & the expansion of dirty energy. • Make utilities accountable for affordability & energy efficiency.
Sustainable Agriculture & Food Justice	Industrial agriculture disproportionately harms rural Black, Indigenous, low-income, and migrant communities through air and water pollution, food insecurity, and unsafe labor conditions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect farmworker health & rights. • Expand access to fresh & healthy food. • Develop community-led science to hold industrial agriculture accountable.
Community Health & Safety	Environmental racism continues to harm community health, where exposure to industrial pollution, toxic chemicals, and unsafe infrastructure has led to elevated rates of cancer, respiratory illness, and neurological disorders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require transparent testing and cleanup of contaminated public and private buildings and infrastructure. • Expand community-centered public health systems. • Protect workers from environmental harms.
Economic Justice & Funding	In rural, Indigenous, and frontline communities, inequitable property taxation, land loss, land grabs, underfunded organizations, and extractive infrastructure have compounded poverty and undermined local autonomy and social and economic capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance community ownership & economic security. • Expand & equitably distribute philanthropic and public funding. • Reform taxation & public funding to support vulnerable communities.
Air & Water Quality/Access	Frontline communities continue to face polluted air and contaminated water due to industrial operations, inadequate oversight, and environmental racism. These harms are often compounded by a lack of monitoring, weak enforcement, and underinvestment in rural and low-income areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure safe and equitable access to clean air and water. • Strengthen and build capacity for air and water monitoring, as well as public health tracking, in communities that are overburdened.
Community Power & Civic Engagement	BIPOC communities continue to be excluded from decisions that directly impact their health, safety, and environment. Voter suppression, top-down planning, and disinvestment in public forums erode community power.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elevate civic participation as a core EJ strategy. • Reclaim the long arc of movement building with intergenerational leadership, purpose, and joy. • Establish and enforce community advisory boards with real power.
Land Stewardship & Self-Determination	Corporate control of agriculture, extractive industries, and colonial and racist legacy legal systems have dispossessed Black and Indigenous communities of their land and denied them the ability to live in balance with the earth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restore land to Indigenous and frontline communities. • Confront colonial legal structures and reassert land-based identity. • Defend Black farmers and fight corporate takeover of agriculture. • Fund programs to teach about EJ and TEK and to document and share community history.

LEGACY POLLUTION AND CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Issue Description

Communities across NC and beyond continue to bear the burden of decades of industrial pollution, including per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and PCBs, coal ash, landfills, and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) waste, while regulatory enforcement remains weak and corporate accountability remains elusive. These cumulative impacts disproportionately harm BIPOC and low-income communities, many of which have been systematically targeted for toxic infrastructure. Many participants testified to suffering from health issues, such as cancers, respiratory illnesses, and impacts on mental health, while local governments and agencies often fail to notify, consult, or protect them. Grassroots leaders are demanding complete remediation, stronger oversight, and meaningful community participation in the fight against environmental racism.

Key Calls to Action

1. Remediate Contaminated Sites and Fully Restore Affected Communities

Speakers from communities living next to landfills, coal ash pits, and other contaminated sites called for a path to complete cleanup and health restoration. Cheryl Johnson and Kathy Colville (Bingham Park Environmental Justice Team) spoke about living near a landfill. They called on Greensboro's city council and state agencies to fully remediate the park and fund a community-engaged process to rebuild it. Chad Martin (NC Black Alliance) underscored this sentiment, adding that these are not new issues, but enduring injustices: "Right around the corner in Bingham Park, it says on the soil, 'Kids, don't put your hands and feet in the soil.' What is a park for if you can't put your hands and feet in the soil?"

2. Reform Permitting Frameworks to Require Permit Denials on the Basis of Cumulative Impacts

Participants called for cumulative impact assessments of polluting facilities and legacy pollution sites that center the lived experiences and health outcomes of affected communities, particularly in rural communities. Dr. Krystal Martin (KMartin Group) highlighted the importance of including these assessments in permitting processes, recommending the passage of a "state-level environmental justice bill that requires regulators to deny permits when industries disproportionately harm rural, low-income, and minority communities."

3. Enforce Accountability for Industrial Polluters

Anti-violence youth ambassadors from Down East Coal Ash Environmental and Social Justice Coalition described how big companies like Duke Energy are not held accountable even after polluting local water with coal ash and how this connects and exposes youth to disinvestment and community violence. Speakers called for stronger government oversight of industrial polluters, including increased state-led facility inspections and investigations of industrial operations. Don Cavellini (Pitt County Coalition Against Racism) shared local victories against harmful projects but noted that victories don't last, "Unfortunately, it's like a whack-a-mole." They called for a national coalition to unite frontline communities. Richard Leak (Concerned Citizens of West Badin Community) also recommended safe decommissioning plans for polluting facilities, to prevent exposure to toxic substances as facilities are torn down or taken out of service. Accountability was especially important due to the longstanding and continuing history of public communications claiming that there were no community safety concerns.

EQUITABLE INFRASTRUCTURE AND LAND USE

Issue Description

In NC, discriminatory zoning laws and infrastructure development have concentrated highways, landfills, pipelines, gas stations, and industrial activity in or near BIPOC and low-income communities. These land use decisions not only expose fenceline communities to pollution and associated health risks, but can also displace families, divide neighborhoods, and restrict access to green space, housing, and public services. Furthermore, harmful zoning practices, land-use decisions, and the development of major infrastructure are often made without meaningful community consultation. Community advocates called for a shift toward equitable land use and zoning policies that incorporate community input or models of community-owned infrastructure, as well as strengthening legal compliance and enforcement of policies that protect overburdened communities. They also discussed the need to invest in community-owned digital infrastructure as technology advances.

Key Calls to Action

1. Enable Community Input to Shape Zoning and Land Use Decisions

Several testimonies stressed the importance of ensuring community voices are heard and incorporated into zoning and local land use decisions. Walter Fields (North of the River Association) highlighted aspects of the community's lived experience that should inform infrastructure decisions, including the risk of toxic exposures (particularly for children), traffic, odor, and noise burdens, as well as economic impacts. Andrew Bryant (Fairview Community Improvement Association) explained that showing up at city council, organizing the community, and collaborating with partners who could document environmental impacts were key to preventing a company from purchasing and rezoning residential land in their community.

2. Enforce Legal Compliance For Land Use Policies

Communities continue to suffer from "violent geography," the state's practice of dividing and displacing communities through highways and hazardous facilities. Veronica Bitting (Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina) testified to how a highway was built through one of the state's first Black neighborhoods without notice. "We deserve to live," they said, referencing ongoing health crises tied to harmful facilities and industrial sites. Omega Wilson (West End Revitalization Association) shared how their organization helped to reroute a highway development in the 1990s and continues to pursue infrastructure justice through community-led planning, federal advocacy, and legal action. Compliance may also include requirements for developers to meet specific public health and environmental protection standards, the creation of environmental or cumulative impact assessments before permit approvals, or assurances that infrastructure development does not violate local zoning ordinances.

3. Expand Community-Owned Infrastructure Models for Both Physical and Digital Infrastructure

Participants shared how community-ownership and cooperative infrastructure models can shift control of community resources from outside developers back to local residents. Chris Suggs (Kinston City Council) described how their community "started acquiring land and buildings in our own neighborhood to build truly autonomous resilience spaces where the young people and the members of our community... [can] plan for our neighborhood and our community's future on our own." Dr. Danielle Koonce (University of North Carolina (UNC), Charlotte) discussed the importance of reimagining digital infrastructure to support communities. "AI is a threat to Black and Brown communities because of who owns it, but there are ways to control our own data."

CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION

Issue Description

Communities across NC are facing intensifying climate disasters, such as flooding, hurricanes, and extreme heat, exacerbated by environmental racism, weakened infrastructure, and a lack of equitable planning. Long-underserved neighborhoods are disproportionately impacted, with elders and children bearing the brunt of disaster impacts, and frontline residents often left out of emergency planning and resource distribution. Members of frontline communities called for increased investment in disaster preparation and resilience efforts, greater transparency regarding the risk of toxic releases from nearby chemical facilities during disasters, and comprehensive post-disaster recovery efforts.

Key Calls to Action

1. Fund Community-Led Climate Preparedness and Recovery Networks

Speakers emphasized the need to move beyond top-down disaster responses and instead invest directly in community-based planning and care networks. Tiffany James (South Carolina Community Care Coalition) urged a shift in mindset: “We’ve depended so much on our [public] authorities... what we should be doing is coming together, teaching our communities how to prepare for not just pandemics [and] also prepare for disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes.” (See more in the appendix on the calls for mutual aid.) Their coalition trained residents to offer direct aid in disaster zones before officials arrive. Chris Suggs (Kinston City Council) shared how youth in his community are designing and building resilience hubs and exploring cooperatively owned housing as a replicable model.

2. Ensure Emergency Planning is Accountable and Transparent

Gwen Smith (Community Health, Aligning Revitalization Resilience & Sustainability) highlighted the critical role that Tribal and Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) should play in informing communities about their risk of toxic exposure and chemical releases in the event of a disaster. They specifically recommended that states fund LEPCs, noting that these committees often lack funding and remain underutilized. They stressed that community members must have access to emergency plans and hazardous site data to protect themselves during disasters.

3. Invest in Trauma-Informed Care and Cultural Preservation in Disaster Recovery

In the wake of disasters that damage or weaken critical infrastructure, participants also emphasized the need to prioritize rebuilding and repairing the public infrastructure that promotes community building and cultural preservation. Shalonda Regan (Seeds of H.O.P.E Project) spoke passionately about the emotional toll repeated disasters take on youth, especially in under-resourced areas. They called for disaster recovery efforts that rebuild not just homes but learning environments, with culturally relevant curricula and trauma-informed care. Keshia Running Water Enoch (7 Directions of Service) and Tina Shull (UNC Charlotte) also emphasized the importance of cultural preservation and storytelling, illustrating how oral histories of climate displacement and community-led archives serve as powerful tools of resistance and healing.

JUST AND RENEWABLE ENERGY SYSTEMS

Issue Description

NC communities continue to face harmful energy development that prioritizes corporate profit over the public good. Methane pipelines and industrial-scale wood pellet production threaten land, air quality, and public health while being falsely framed as facilitating “clean energy” solutions. Biogas from factory farms is promoted as renewable, despite reinforcing toxic waste cycles in rural Communities of Color. At the same time, access to renewable energy remains limited, with high utility costs and energy shutoffs disproportionately affecting low-income and Black communities. Grassroots advocates called for energy democracy, affordability, and locally controlled renewable energy solutions.

Key Calls to Action

1. Shift Energy Ownership to Communities

Speakers called for community-owned energy infrastructure, like solar and microgrids, alongside renewable energy job training and economic self-determination. Amy Adams (Southeast Climate and Energy Network) emphasized that “energy systems should belong to and be controlled by the people.” William J. Barber III (Rural Beacon Initiative) also urged investment in rural clean energy jobs and pathways to community ownership.

2. Stop False Solutions and Dirty Energy Expansion

Participants rejected manure biogas, wood pellets, and new methane and nuclear projects as harmful distractions when shifting from fossil fuels to clean energy. Rev. Mac Legerton (Robeson County Cooperative for Sustainable Development) called for a moratorium on these expansions and proposed a transparent, community-informed climate energy plan for all 100 NC counties. Others talked about how these false solutions are actually harmful to their local health and environment. Dr. Ruby Bell, Impacted Communities Against Wood Pellets, described how they experienced poor air quality, high cancer rates, and mucus membrane irritation from living in close proximity to a wood pellet facility, while Dr. Sherri White-Williamson (Environmental Justice Community Action Network (EJCAN)) discussed the impacts of deforestation.

3. Make Utilities Accountable for Affordability and Efficiency

With rural households in the south spending up to 65% of their income on energy, Shayne Kinloch (South Carolina Energy Coalition) highlighted South Carolina’s energy burden crisis. They called for utility accountability, energy efficiency upgrades, and shutoff protections to ensure energy justice reaches those most impacted.

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND FOOD JUSTICE

Issue Description

The environmental, economic, and health harms of industrial agriculture disproportionately burden rural communities in NC. CAFOs and corn processing facilities pollute the air and water, especially in BIPOC and low-income areas. These same communities often experience food insecurity and a lack of access to healthy, affordable food. Farmworkers, many of them migrants, face systemic exploitation, pesticide exposure, and few legal protections. Industrial Agricultural companies continue to promote false solutions, such as biogas, as a renewable energy source to legitimize their current waste management practices, while impacted residents call instead for real investments in food justice, community care, and local self-determination.

Key Calls to Action

1. **Protect Farmworker Health and Rights**

Speakers exposed the deep structural racism and legal neglect that farmworkers face, calling for enforceable labor protections and systemic reform. Amy Elkins and Yesenia Cuello (NC Focus on Increasing Education, Leadership, and Dignity (NC FIELD)), who come from the farmworker community, described how farmworkers face unstable and unhealthy living conditions, such as septic runoff and pesticide exposure. They testified: “The system isn’t broken—it wasn’t built for us.” They described unsafe conditions: “My community is the farmers without land, and the ones being sprayed with pesticides... My community doesn’t need saving, we need systems to stop stealing from us.”

2. **Expand Access to Fresh & Healthy Food**

Several testimonies called for increased accessibility to healthy, nutritious, and affordable food options, particularly in rural, low-wealth, and BIPOC communities. Makayla Johnson (A Better Chance A Better Community) advocated for universal school meals and better pay for teachers, stating, “We must feed our students’ minds and bodies.” Amari Lathan (Down East Coal Ash Environmental and Social Justice Coalition) highlighted youth food insecurity and isolation: “There is no healthy food, nothing positive... nothing to do for kids.” Tiffany James (South Carolina Community Care Coalition) recommended community-managed food distribution programs, particularly in under-resourced communities or areas prone to climate disasters. Additionally, Ramona Big Eagle, an oral historian and legend keeper for the NC Tuscarora Nation, and Coda Cavalier (7 Directions of Service) highlighted the importance of access to traditional and sacred foods.

3. **Develop Community-Led Science to Hold Industrial Agriculture Accountable**

Matthew Aubourg (Johns Hopkins University) explained that “community-driven approaches to EJ science can help hold polluters accountable,” sharing how DNA evidence and air monitoring expose the harms of CAFOs and biogas infrastructure. Exemplified through their partnerships with NC organizations such as the Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help (REACH), Matthew advocated for community-owned research initiatives that center the experiences of fenceline communities, using this research to highlight shared concerns, build power, and hold polluters accountable.

COMMUNITY HEALTH AND SAFETY

Issue Description

Environmental racism continues to harm community health across NC, where exposure to toxic chemicals, industrial pollution, and unsafe infrastructure has led to elevated rates of cancer, respiratory illness, and neurological disorders. From farmworker communities facing pesticide exposure to students and elders exposed to PCBs and asbestos, residents are demanding transparency, accountability, and investment in public health. Speakers emphasized the need to protect children, support survivors of natural disasters, and prioritize public health as a fundamental right.

Key Calls to Action

1. **Require Transparent Testing and Cleanup of Contaminated Public and Private Buildings and Infrastructure**

Multiple testimonies highlighted the failure of universities, corporations, and government agencies to notify the public or protect them from hazardous contaminants. Chelsea Lunquist and Sandy Alford (Campus Community Alliance for Environmental Justice) both described the widespread PCB contamination in campus buildings at North Carolina State University (NCSU), noting that university leadership had taken no action. They also suggested a state bill that would mandate PCB testing and give state agencies the authority to remove PCBs and mitigate toxic exposures.

2. **Expand Community-Centered Public Health Systems**

Speakers voiced the need for increased access to affordable healthcare in rural communities to address health impacts from toxic exposures and provide potentially lifesaving treatment. Bridget Phifer (Living Better Life) called for increased access to healthcare infrastructure in the state's low-wealth neighborhoods, noting that "some of [the] poorest concentrated areas [are] not only heavily populated Black and Brown areas, but also the sickest areas as well." Speakers also framed health as not only an individual or clinical concern, but as a collective, intergenerational matter tied to EJ and survival. yh Patt (Rock Rest Community) stated: "Telling stories is medicine. And it's medicine because we no longer carry the story in our bodies," pointing to the importance of speaking out against toxic exposures and ongoing health risks. They called for deeper integration of political organizing and storytelling in environmental health work.

3. **Protect Workers from Environmental Harms**

Multiple testimonies highlighted the importance of enforceable labor protections that can prevent or limit exposure to toxic pollutants among workers and their families. Matthew Aubourg (Johns Hopkins University) explained how filth from CAFOs is transported from workers' clothes to their home and family, underscoring the need to reduce exposure to these pollutants in the workplace. Hwa Huang (The NCSU Grad Workers Union, UE Local 150) described how union members are fighting for protections across a range of issues, including "not just pay and benefits, but also the fight for environmental justice with PCB exposure," reinforcing the need for employers to be held legally accountable for addressing the risk of toxic exposure faced by their employees.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND FUNDING

Issue Description

Community testimony made clear that economic justice is foundational to environmental justice. In rural, Indigenous, and frontline communities, inequitable property taxation, land loss, underfunded organizations, and extractive infrastructure have compounded poverty and undermined local autonomy. Speakers emphasized that justice must go beyond redistribution; it must include self-determination, agency over public investment, and long-term funding for community-controlled institutions. Participants also raised concerns over funding disparities for Native-led organizations, rural projects, and hyperlocal movement work, all while extractive corporations and wealthy landowners continue to benefit from unjust systems.

Key Calls to Action

1. Advance Community Ownership and Economic Security

Speakers called for models of ownership that place economic power in the hands of the community. Reylan Cook (Duke University) explained that discrimination in US Department of Agriculture grants led to Black land loss and decimated generational wealth. William J. Barber III (Rural Beacon Initiative) emphasized that “over \$1.2 trillion in public and private capital is projected to flow into the United States energy economy over the next decade.” Both urged investments in rural job training, community cooperatives, and land trusts. Barber suggested, “We need to create pathways for ownership, looking at rebirthing things like land trusts, community cooperatives, local enterprises—models that don’t just bring investment to communities, but let communities own and shape the wealth that they generate.” Through efforts like these, Cook specified that “we can build economic systems that work for our people, not against us.”

2. Expand and Equitably Distribute Philanthropic and Public Funding

Multiple testimonies pointed to funding disparities. Dr. Sherri White-Williamson (EJCAN) challenged the assumption that rural communities are resourced: “We have found through these toxic tours that most folks in urban spaces assume that everything is fine in rural communities. That is not the case.” They recommended strategically thinking about engaging with outside funders “to give more to communities like ours. They are not giving enough. Five percent of their endowment is not enough.” Lynnette Grey Bull (Not Our Native Daughters) added, “Native nonprofits get the least funding out of every nonprofit sector and issue that is out there,” calling for recognition of Indigenous-led sustainability efforts.

3. Reform Taxation and Public Funding to Support Vulnerable Communities

Judge Beverly Scarlett (Indigenous Memories) called for urgent reform of property tax systems that are displacing low-income families and Indigenous communities: “Today, in counties across the Piedmont [region], an algorithm is being used that increases the tax burden on the poor and legacy farmlands. It increases the tax burdens within communities of color, while the wealthy benefit.” They proposed diverse, accountable, and transparent appraisal teams, as well as improved legislation and policy surrounding property revaluations.

AIR AND WATER QUALITY/ACCESS

Issue Description

Frontline communities in NC and beyond continue to face polluted air and contaminated water due to industrial operations, inadequate oversight, and environmental racism. These harms are often compounded by a lack of monitoring, weak enforcement, and underinvestment in rural and low-income areas, leaving residents to bear the health consequences while fighting for transparency and access to clean air and water. Residents are demanding clean air and water as fundamental rights, stronger enforcement against polluters, and investments in community-led environmental justice.

Key Calls to Action

1. Ensure Safe and Equitable Access to Clean Air and Water

Residents demanded stricter oversight and enforcement of existing clean air and water protections, as well as improved water infrastructure. Susan Dickenson, a resident of Jamestown, NC, described how the Deep River's contamination from decades of textile industry pollution continues to threaten the drinking water supply for Guilford County. This illustrates the longstanding neglect of water system oversight and cleanup, highlighting the need for infrastructure upgrades and enforcement. Dr. Sherri White-Williamson (EJCAN) noted that, among the many environmental issues their county faces, 47% of Sampson County relies on private residential wells that have been contaminated by PFAS. "We offer free water testing and testing results in about 250 homes and have found water contamination rates of about 13%," they said. The testimony highlights failures in drinking water infrastructure and the need for safe water systems, especially in lower-income and rural areas.

2. Strengthen and Build Capacity for Air and Water Monitoring & Public Health Tracking in Overburdened Communities

Testifiers emphasized the urgent need for air and water quality data that communities can trust and access. Dr. Krystal Martin (KMartin Group), from Mississippi, described how a wood pellet production facility was exacerbating air pollution and contributing to respiratory illness rates in their community. "We need real-time air quality monitoring stations in rural communities..., [and the] State Department of Health to start tracking our respiratory illness rates, and our cancer rates in our communities, and correlate that with industrial pollution." Susan Dickinson also described how their community began monitoring their water and air in response to regulatory failure, noting: "When you can challenge a clueless councilman or planning board member with facts...about the unaddressed soil and groundwater contaminants...it can slow things down a bit, trigger an inspection," calling for funding to expand this work and support peer-to-peer education strategies to help others do the same.

COMMUNITY POWER AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Issue Description

Frontline communities continue to be excluded from decisions that directly impact their health, safety, and environment. Voter suppression, top-down planning, and disinvestment in public forums erode community power. Building and sustaining community power is essential to advancing EJ. In the face of political repression, corporate influence, and environmental harm, frontline leaders are organizing with urgency and intention, connecting civic engagement, local governance, and cultural resilience as core EJ strategies. Speakers reminded us that this is not just a fight for policy change, but a long-term movement for collective liberation that requires joy, courage, and generational commitment.

Key Calls to Action

1. Elevate Civic Participation as a Core EJ Strategy

Speakers emphasized that community organizing and voter mobilization are indispensable tools for resisting environmental racism and political rollbacks. Jose Saucedo (PowerUp NC) invoked the legacy of civil rights icon John Lewis and his call for “good trouble,” urging young people to see themselves as leaders. Saucedo called on attendees to knock on doors, vote in every election, and organize locally with “revolutionary” energy. Several participants urged attendees to recommit to civic responsibility and resistance.

2. Reclaim the Long Arc of Movement Building with Intergenerational Leadership, Purpose, and Joy

Several speakers referred to the longstanding legacy of the EJ movement and the need for intergenerational organizing and visioning. Dr. Deja Perkins (Naturally Wild, LLC) emphasized that for organizing to be intergenerational, it needs to bridge the gap between younger generations who organize on social media and elders who organize in person. They called for “more of these spaces where we are organizing together and facilitating the passing of the torch from one generation to another.” Others emphasized that these long-standing fights, which extend past generational boundaries, need to be rooted in joy. Christina Cummings (Christina Care Consulting), a resident of Atlanta, Georgia, reminded participants that the current “policy landscape gives us an opportunity to be creative and think about what we build next and what we can build that’s new,” and that the work must be grounded in community joy and solidarity, “galvanize and organize around your local experiences and your local challenges.”

3. Establish and Enforce Community Advisory Boards with Real Power

Testifiers called for the creation and enforcement of community advisory boards or other formal mechanisms to ensure resident input and oversight across environmental planning, infrastructure development, disaster response, and remediation efforts. Amy Adams (Southeast Climate and Energy Network) criticized how public utility commissions in the South approve fossil fuel projects. They called for community advisory boards to have power over “every energy plan,” like Duke Energy’s Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) and state-level regulatory decisions.

LAND STEWARDSHIP AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Issue Description

Across NC, frontline and Indigenous communities are demanding a fundamental shift in how land is owned, used, and governed. Testimonies highlighted how corporate control of agriculture, extractive industries, and colonial legal systems has dispossessed communities of their land and denied them the ability to live in balance with the earth. Speakers called for a return to land stewardship rooted in self-determination, traditional knowledge, and collective care. They also discussed the importance of documenting community history to maintain records of community truth that can be passed on to future generations, as well as the need to provide education on environmental justice and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to youth. For Black, Indigenous, and rural communities in particular, reclaiming land is not only a matter of justice—it is a matter of survival.

Key Calls to Action

1. Restore Land to Indigenous and Frontline Communities

Kaniela Ing (Green New Deal Network), a resident of Hawaii, noted that many of the same environmental injustices seen in NC are mirrored across Indigenous lands elsewhere: “In Hawaii, there’s jet fuel that poisoned our aquifer. In North Carolina, there’s coal ash in your rivers. Your creeks hold the same toxins that bleach our coral reefs...Different places, same patterns. And the same perpetrators.” They emphasized that real climate solutions must begin with returning land to those who care for it best: “We just want to live on it, grow on it, swim in it, and let our kids run free.” They called for breaking up corporate monopolies, ending corporate tax breaks, renaming the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Food, and rebuilding ancestral villages to feed people, not profit.

2. Confront Colonial Legal Structures and Reassert Land-Based Identity

Donna Chavis, a Lumbee elder from Pembroke, NC, urged communities to reject the systems of ownership and extraction embedded in US law that came from Europe: “The roots of colonialism is still very, very much alive and real in this country, and we can never forget that...we must put a stop to that and say ‘no, we are not going to be owned, we are not going to be controlled.’” One specific way to address colonialism is through “Rights of Nature” legislation, called for by Seth Harris and Coda Cavalier (7 Directions of Service), which gives natural systems legally enforceable rights to existence and protection. Savi Horne (North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers, Land Loss Prevention Project) underscored the urgent need to protect and expand space for grassroots convening and resistance. They called for continued use of tools to prevent land loss, investments in gathering spaces, and recognition of ‘spatial justice,’ the right to access, inhabit, and organize within place, as essential to environmental justice. “In North Carolina, we [already] have some tools that we can use around land loss prevention,” they asserted.

3. Defend Black Farmers and Fight Corporate Takeover of Agriculture

William Robert Ingram (Richmond County Coalition for Justice and Black Empowerment) spoke of the legacy of Black entrepreneurship in NC, and enduring threats to Black land ownership, including violence from white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, against leaders who advocate for self-determination. “Just because one person can make it through, that doesn’t mean there’s a door that all of us are meant to walk through, right?” they said. Testimonies called for protections for Black farmers and small landowners, investments in community-controlled agriculture, and policies that curb the consolidation of Big Ag.

4. Fund Programs to Teach about EJ and TEK and to Document and Share Community History

Several speakers discussed that educating youth and documenting and sharing community history was important to self-determination. Dr. Danielle Koonce (UNC Charlotte) talked about the importance of passing on generational knowledge about the EJ movement, encouraging the elders in the room to “write their recipes down... before [they] leave the kitchen.” In a similar vein, Dr. Madhusudan Katti (NCSU) urged people to remember their origins and both their human and non-human relatives. Others testified to the need for both funding for schools in BIPOC communities and community-led EJ education programs for youth. Dr. Ryan Emanuel (Duke University) stated that teaching EJ in schools is a valuable way to educate future government officials, decision-makers, and environmental leaders, and Seth Harris (7 Directions of Service), this also includes TEK.

APPENDIX A: OTHER NORTH CAROLINA ISSUES

The preceding issue areas were established as an initial framework for the PEJAC to facilitate development of a national environmental justice agenda. In creating the framework and defining the ten issue areas, we struck a balance between breadth and focus. Many of the local testimonies may have elaborated in greater detail or even extended beyond the categories of this iteration of the framework. We wish to call attention to some of these important topics here:

Rising Authoritarianism

Several speakers discussed concerns about the rise of authoritarianism in the United States. Shaun McMillan (Blueprint NC) pointed out that “Since 2020, elected officials almost everywhere have doubled down on local tools of authoritarianism and increased funding for police,” adding “our communities will continue to bear the brunt of disparate policing and mass incarceration.” They called for a new vision for community safety that could be identified through participatory budgeting, naming the Heart Program in Durham as “the gold standard for human response to mental health crises.” Nora Khalife (Muslim Women For) discussed how Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers surveil communities, citing the passage of H.B. 318 (The Criminal Illegal Alien Enforcement Act) as further evidence of rising authoritarianism. They called on NC Governor Josh Stein to veto the bill. Amy Elkins and Yesenia Cuello (NC FIELD) explained that the “government uses, abuses, and oppresses, and then when they think they no longer need you, they simply call you a criminal,” when speaking of farmworkers. In light of criminalization and mass incarcerations of Black and Brown communities, Frederick Johnson from the Center for Engagement, Environmental Justice and Health INpowering Communities (CEEJH INC) at the University of Maryland, questioned how environmental justice principles could be incorporated into sanctuary cities. Both Shaun McMillan and yh Patt (Rock Rest Community) tied local issues to authoritarianism globally, discussing the connections between their experiences and the genocide in Palestine.

Disability Justice

Many attendees testified to the intersections between the EJ movement and other justice movements. Dr. Valerie Ann Johnson (NCEJN) encouraged the EJ movement to consider how living with disability exacerbates the effects of environmental injustice. They also warned against stigmatizing disability in our EJ communications. Dr. Johnson recommended communication frames that highlight how pollution “affects the quality of life of us all” as opposed to saying “you may end up with [a] disability or birth defect when exposed.” Finally, they cautioned against distinguishing between normal and living with disability or illness, recommending phrases like “born with this condition caused by exposure to a specific chemical” instead of being born with a birth defect.

Crime and Gun Violence

Some of the speakers discussed the impacts of crime and gun violence in their communities. Lynnette Grey Bull (Not Our Native Daughters) testified about the Missing, Murdered, Indigenous Women and Relatives across their nation and discussed limitations in Native sexual assault survivors’ access to cultural healing, including “smudging, sage, sweetgrass, and red cedar to heal, [and] sweat lodge.” Bobby Jones (Down East Coal Ash Environmental and Social Justice Coalition) worked with youth in his community to establish the Antiviolence Youth Ambassadors following a shooting in their community. They and youth from their community called for strengthened gun regulations and expanded after-school and weekend programming for youth.



Mutual Aid Networks

Tiffany James (South Carolina Community Care Coalition) asserted that “EJ is care” when discussing the mutual networks that began during the COVID-19 pandemic and have continued into the coalition’s ongoing work. Kee Zamastil (Raleigh People’s Budget Assembly) encouraged attendees to “be revolutionary in every attempt that you can,” identifying mutual aid and care as revolutionary acts. Ramona Big Eagle, an oral historian and legend keeper for the NC Tuscarora Nation, emphasized that communities need both self-sufficiency and community interdependence. They called for reclaiming traditional knowledge systems, growing one’s own food, and independently securing clean water, while also emphasizing the need to set aside community differences in favor of collective strength and solidarity. Ultimately, they emphasized that mutual aid and community care are essential components of community resilience.

Data Justice

Some speakers focused on data access and transparency to further the advocacy of frontline communities. Lisa Garcia, a former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Regional Administrator and Environmental Justice Advisor under the Obama Administration, shared that the EJScreen tool, which is now removed from the EPA website, was initially designed to increase government transparency and data access, thereby enhancing benefits and reducing harms in frontline communities. They argued that data and community-informed solutions were key to holding governing bodies at all levels accountable. At the same time, Dr. Caren Cooper (NCSU) cautioned that citizen and community science risks reinforcing inequalities by collecting and using datasets from predominantly white communities. They called for equitable research practices that center research methodologies on Communities of Color.