

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Environmental Justice Resolution

OWEB Resolution 02-2024

Background

WHEREAS the intersection of impacts from climate change, biodiversity loss, and the movement for social justice has increased our awareness of the need for transformational change. Our conservation and restoration work has shown us the interdependence of all species, and that action or inaction in one area affects the outcome in others.

WHEREAS in keeping with OWEB's mission helping to protect and restore healthy watersheds and natural habitats that support thriving communities and strong economies, our work must fully integrate and balance environmental, social, and economic sustainability in order to fulfill this mission to better serve all Oregonians and engage more partners.

WHEREAS a multi-dimensional diversity of people, including ethnicities, identities, backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, experiencing of disabilities, cultural values and practices, local and indigenous environmental knowledge, and values of nature all contribute to the collective wisdom and stewardship needed for achieving long-term sustainability and resilience in our watershed restoration and conservation work. The voices of all Oregonians have value.

WHEREAS while everyone lives in a watershed, not all Oregonians or their communities are starting from the same place due to historic and current embedded biases in society's structure and institutional systems of oppression. These biases have led to inequities in policies, practices, processes, and the distribution of resources, benefits, and burdens. In order to realize fairness in access and outcomes, different levels of support are needed, including equitable and fair distribution of resources, power, and opportunity for empowerment of those most impacted.

WHEREAS the most severe and immediate impacts of climate change disproportionately affect the communities who are the least able to prepare for and recover from these impacts. Many communities rely on healthy watershed ecosystems for their health and livelihoods and are therefore uniquely vulnerable to changes in their environment caused by climate change. Other communities which have traditionally been underrepresented, underinvested, and underserved bear additional environmental burdens which intensify their risks. These communities are diverse in many ways, including their ethnicities, cultures, nations of origin, race, immigration status, levels of income, and experiencing of disabilities. They all deserve environmental justice of equal protection, fair treatment, and involvement in decision-making regarding policies affecting their environment without discrimination.

WHEREAS we acknowledge the dispossession of indigenous communities of land ownership, Oregon's history of racism, and systemic injustices that have excluded many Oregonians from the benefits and opportunities afforded others.

WHEREAS OWEB's culture of continuous improvement allows us to self-examine and recognize some of our structural biases and institutional policies, practices, and processes that help perpetuate inequities; that while some of these may fall outside of our authority, they do not absolve us of our need for change. Achieving our mission demands we consider all actions within our authority to restore and protect, and as our name implies improve the health of our watersheds for the well-being and benefit of all.

WHEREAS we acknowledge that diversity, equity, and inclusion are interconnected, that none can thrive without the presence of the other, and that together with environmental justice they must be front and center in all of our board decisions, policy making, processes, and practices, as these considerations are essential for the restoration, protection, and long-term sustainability of our ecosystems, their wildlife populations and communities.

Resolution

Be it resolved that the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board will:

1. Integrate and prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion, and environmental justice in all of our board decisions, policy making, processes, and other practices by:
 - a. Ensuring a diverse, equitable, and inclusive distribution of resources and grants for both land-owning and non-landowning Oregonians.
 - b. Increasing project types that address the needs of urban and near-urban areas as part of Oregon's Natural and Working Lands.
 - c. Identifying and implementing incentives for investing in Environmental Justice Communities.
 - d. Building a more inclusive grant-making process to reflect a broader diversity of applicants, grantees, and types of partners in project development and stewardship, including community-based organizations and other private sector groups, businesses, and organizations that have not traditionally been engaged in this work.
 - e. Increasing & improving methods and diversifying targets of outreach and access to information so that all Oregonians can become aware of OWEB and the support we can provide.
 - f. Allowing for the tailoring of projects and processes to address locally expressed inequities and priorities while keeping in mind that some community-identified solutions may differ from what we prioritize yet still yield co-benefits beyond that of a singular outcome.
 - g. Identifying and implementing methods to strengthen public involvement, improve access to information, provide more inclusive decision-making opportunities, and increase community engagement that values the needs, priorities, and solutions expressed by the community, as well as their time and resources making it possible to participate.
 - h. Recognizing and incorporating the inextricable link between cultural and biological diversity as part of our community-based conservation, including the varying cultural values of and relationships with nature and the holistic approaches of indigenous peoples and local communities.
 - i. Recognizing the unique role federally recognized tribes in Oregon have in the conservation, stewardship, and restoration of natural resources; and with their permission and counsel, work to incorporate their tribal knowledge, experience, cultural, and spiritual values into our grant-making processes.
2. Support grantees to enlist, train, and fairly compensate partners in project development from local labor and businesses to strengthen local economies and skills by funding projects accordingly.
3. Continue to challenge our perspectives and positions; recognize and overcome our biases; look for ways we are limiting awareness of OWEB and access to resources from those outside our sphere; and work to counteract and dismantle institutional racism while advancing racial equity. Translate these findings into changes in policy, processes, and practices.

It is further resolved that the above resolutions will be implemented through applicable strategies within OWEB's authorities. Strategies include but are not limited to:

1. Participating at least annually in intercultural competency and racial justice training for all staff and Board Members.
2. Continuing outreach work to broaden OWEB's partnerships.
3. Rulemaking to reduce the match requirement for some grant types.
4. Amending OWEB's application, grant-making, and grantee support processes to be easily accessible, time-considerate, inclusive of a broader range of effective land-stewardship practices, and vigilant to the needs of vulnerable and traditionally underserved communities, including providing training and assistance.
5. Remediating the dispossession of Tribal land ownership through our Acquisition Grant program where possible.
6. Developing an agency Diversity Equity, Inclusion, and Environmental Justice Action Plan, which includes agency-level goals, actions, and measures of success, for annual review.
7. Amending grants budget and spending plan development to address inequities in the distribution of resources, including the limited types of grants and projects available for traditionally underrepresented, underserved, and climate-vulnerable communities.
8. Improving OWEB's communications to meet the needs of Oregon's diverse population and updating the website to be intuitively navigable, user-friendly, and resource-rich, including tools and guidance for translating this resolution into action.
9. Developing methods to track the benefits of OWEB programs to diverse communities. Actively listen to diverse voices and integrate them into the grantmaking process to ensure that solutions benefit all communities.

Definitions

Diversity: Honoring and including people of different backgrounds, identities, and experiences collectively and as individuals. It emphasizes the need for sharing power and increasing representation of communities that are systemically underrepresented and under-resourced. These differences are strengths that maximize the state's competitive advantage through innovation, effectiveness, and adaptability.

[Source: State of Oregon Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan (2021)]

Inclusion: is a state of belonging when persons of different backgrounds, experiences, and identities are valued, integrated, and welcomed equitably as decision-makers, collaborators, and colleagues. Ultimately, inclusion is the environment that organizations create to allow these differences to thrive.

[Source: State of Oregon Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan (2021)]

Equity: Equity acknowledges that not all people, or all communities, are starting from the same place due to historic and current systems of oppression. Equity is the effort to provide different levels of support based on an individual's or group's needs in order to achieve fairness in outcomes. Equity actionably empowers communities most impacted by systemic oppression and requires the redistribution of resources, power, and opportunity to those communities.

[Source: State of Oregon Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan (2021)]

Environmental justice: means equal protection from environmental and health risks, fair treatment, and meaningful involvement in decision-making of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, immigration status, income, or other identities with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies that affect the environment in which people live, work, learn and practice spirituality and culture.

[Source: Oregon Environmental Justice Council / HB 4077 (2022)]

Environmental justice communities: include communities of color, communities experiencing lower incomes, communities experiencing health inequities, tribal communities, rural communities, remote communities, coastal communities, communities with limited infrastructure and other communities traditionally underrepresented in public processes and adversely harmed by environmental and health hazards, including seniors, youth and persons with disabilities.

[Source: Oregon Environmental Justice Council / HB 4077 (2022)]

Natural and Working Lands: refers to all of those listed in Section 23 of Oregon House Bill 3409 (2023).