

Los Jardines Institute (The Gardens Institute)

December 12, 2017

The Honorable Senator Tom Udall
531 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC, 20510

The Honorable Senator Martin Heinrich
303 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC, 20510

Re: Proposed Cuts to EPA's Staff and Programs Would Harm New Mexico's Health and Environment, and Decimate Local and State Budgets

Dear Senator Udall and Senator Heinrich:

On behalf of our members, and Los Jardines Institute (the Gardens Institute) and the Concerned Citizens of Wagon Mound and Mora County, we write today urging your action to protect funding and programs administered by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that are vital to our individual health and the health of Albuquerque and New Mexico, and especially to our Indigenous, Latino, African-American, and low-income communities, which are heavily impacted by multiple environmental hazards.

Los Jardines Institute works to build and support healthy and sustainable communities and spaces. We do this by providing opportunities that promote multi-generational, community-based models of learning, sharing, and building community.

South Albuquerque, Mora County, and many other areas of New Mexico that benefit from EPA programs and funding, are vibrant communities, but are also dealing with a legacy of environmental injustice, the threat of chemical facility disasters, contaminated industrial sites, and substantial economic development problems. The Mountain View community in south Albuquerque, a largely people of color community with many residents living in poverty, faces many environmental and health hazards from a history of heavy industrial development, combined with a lack of green space and quality public infrastructure and services.

Our communities of Albuquerque and Mora County, and the entire state of New Mexico, need ongoing support and engagement from EPA's professional staff in its regional and national offices, continued funding through its critical grant programs, and enhanced implementation and enforcement of the laws and rules that protect our air, water, soil, and health. We have had success beginning to reduce toxic air emissions, remove threats of chemical disasters, and redevelop toxic sites to build healthier communities, progress only made possible with support from EPA's programs and staff, including its Environmental Justice program, Brownfields program, and others.

EPA regional and national staff have traveled to New Mexico numerous times to meet with community and local officials, providing critical information, guidance, and support for our efforts to understand and reduce toxic emissions that impact our health and environment. Support from Environmental Justice staff and programs have been essential to our ability to understand the hazards we face and work toward solutions.

EPA's engagement led directly to the replacement of highly toxic chlorine gas with safer alternatives by the Southside wastewater treatment plant in Albuquerque's Mountain View community, protecting 160,000 nearby residents from the daily threat of a chemical disaster.¹ Nationally, the percentage of Blacks and Latinos living in fence-line zones near facilities using extremely hazardous chemicals is significantly higher than for the U.S. as a whole, and the poverty rate in these zones is significantly higher than for the U.S. as a whole.² Unequal exposures to toxic pollution reduce opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and cause economic harm to individuals and communities.³

Despite these facts, the Trump Administration has proposed to slash EPA's Environmental Justice program, eliminating the equivalent of 40 staff positions that work to address health and environmental issues in communities of color, low-income communities, and Tribal communities, and even entirely eliminate the Office of Environmental Justice.

EPA's Environmental Justice Small Grants program supported development of an Environmental and Economic Justice Strategic Plan for the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge in the Mountain View community, the Southwest's first urban national wildlife refuge. The same EJ program funded the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project to educate Zuni youth about the importance of environmental stewardship and engage them in issues such as recycling, waste disposal, and solid waste reduction.

EPA funds 30% of state and local air quality monitoring in New Mexico, as part of the \$35 million each year our state receives in grants for air and water protection, toxic cleanup, and other services to businesses and communities. In fiscal 2016 also, New Mexico received \$1.9 million for water protection. The 16 Superfund and 80 brownfield sites in New Mexico can only be cleaned up and returned to productive use through EPA funding.⁴

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has stated his intention to abandon much of the EPA's role in protecting public health and the environment, which we depend on for a healthy economy and communities, and shifting these responsibilities to already underfunded and overburdened state budgets. Not only can most states not possibly absorb these costs and duties, a national approach to key issues – including environmental justice – makes sense, and the opportunities and benefits of these programs should be available to all Americans, not just those who live in the wealthiest states. In fact, EPA's current Environmental Justice Strategy (EJ 2020) specifically recognizes “the need for a more systematic approach to reducing environmental and health disparities for minority, low-income and tribal populations and improve the air, water and land in the nation's most overburdened communities” and includes national goals and activities.⁵

¹ Kevin Robinson-Avila, ABCWUA launches massive waste-water plant overhaul, Albuquerque Business First, Oct. 6, 2011, <http://www.bizjournals.com/albuquerque/print-edition/2011/10/07/abcwua-launches-massive-waste-water.html?page=all>.

² Ibid.

³ Boyce J et al (2014). Institute for New Economic Thinking. *Three Measures of Environmental Inequality*.

⁴ Environmental Defense Fund, Proposed Cuts To EPA Budget Threaten Human Health And The Environment in New Mexico, https://www.edf.org/sites/default/files/NM_EPA_Cuts_Factsheet_6_22_17.pdf.

⁵ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EJ 2020 Action Agenda: EPA's Environmental Justice Strategy at

Albuquerque, Mora County, and New Mexico cannot possibly take on these costs and programs, and their reduction or elimination would directly harm the health, environment, and economy of our cities and state. Any attempt to recreate federal programs from scratch on a state-by-state and city-by-city basis would be costly and inefficient, and would never be attempted in most places.

EPA's staff, programs, and grants, including its Environmental Justice programs, provide concrete, irreplaceable support to Albuquerque, Mora County, and the state of New Mexico, and bring substantial health and economic benefits that far outweigh the costs. Maintaining these programs and grants through the federal EPA is logical, financially efficient, and more effective than slashing these budgets and pushing responsibility onto states.

We urge to you reject all of the Administration's proposed cuts to EPA's FY 2018 budget, and ask you to support robust continued funding for these critical health and environmental programs, including the Environmental Justice program, the Brownfields program, and grants to cities, states, and communities for both special projects and ongoing "categorical" grants to develop and implement environmental programs.

Thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your action in support of the important programs EPA administers for the health and economic prosperity of your constituents.

Sincerely,

Richard Moore
Co-Coordinator
Los Jardines Institute

Dr. Sofia Martinez
President
Concerned Citizens of Wagon Mound and Mora County

803 La Vega Drive, SW
Albuquerque, NM, 87105

cc: The Honorable Mitch McConnell, Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Charles Schumer, Minority Leader, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman, U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Vice Chairman, U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
Members of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
Members of the U.S. Senate

<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/ej-2020-action-agenda-epas-environmental-justice-strategy>, and National EJ Challenges at <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/ej-2020-national-ej-challenges#existing>.