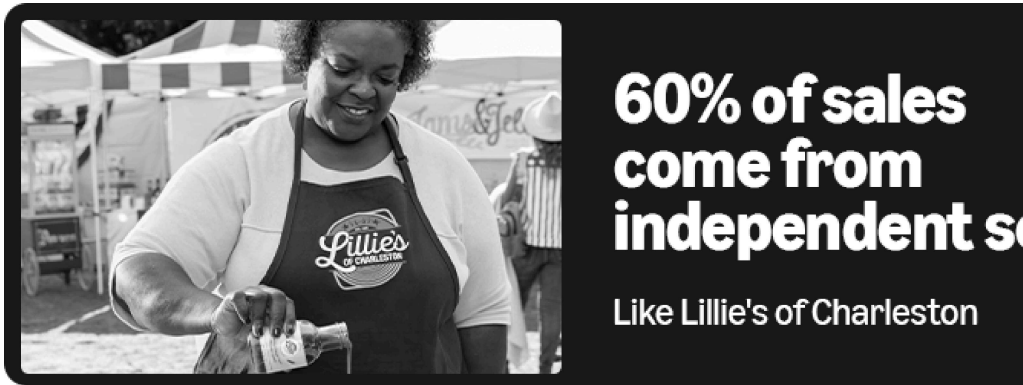


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How Trump's environmental justice cuts at EPA could affect California

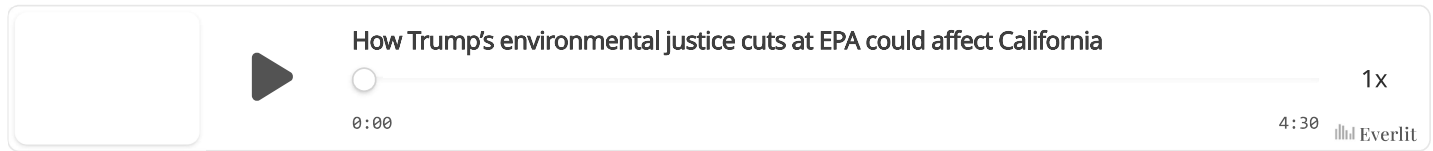
By Kurtis Alexander, Reporter

March 12, 2025



Housing is seen in the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood in 2016. The area, in the vicinity of the old, polluted former shipyard, is one that could be impacted by the Trump administration's renunciation of environmental justice initiatives.

Santiago Mejia/Special to The Chronicle



The Trump administration's plan to shutter the Environmental Protection Agency's programs on equity and justice could cripple efforts to curb pollution in California's most disadvantaged communities, from the Central Valley to the Inland Empire to San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point.

While EPA officials have not specified what employees or divisions will be targeted in the move, between 25 and 50 people in the agency's Pacific Southwest Region, which includes California and three other states, work predominantly on environmental justice issues and may be vulnerable, according to former EPA staffers who spoke with the Chronicle.

Scores more do work that involves poor and minority communities and could also be at risk of losing their jobs, former staffers speculated. Some of these people have already been let go.

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Environmental advocates and former EPA employees fear that widespread cuts to the staff doing environmental justice work, notably community engagement personnel and grant coordinators, will undermine key initiatives to clean up hazardous waste, ensure healthy air and protect water supplies for California's most vulnerable residents.

"This is just an additional thing to worry about when we thought we had long-term solutions and now we don't know," said Maraid Jimenez with the Community Water Center, a Tulare County-based group that relies on federal support to improve drinking water systems in farmworker communities. "We're closely monitoring to see where things fall."

EPA officials confirmed in an email to the Chronicle on Thursday that they were eliminating the “Environmental Justice and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion arms of the agency.” The action, they said, was in response to President Donald Trump’s directives to end DEI programs, which Republicans have seized on as un-democratic and dumbing down the federal workforce.

“President Trump was elected with a mandate from the American people,” said EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin in a statement. “Part of this mandate includes the elimination of forced discrimination programs. Under the Trump Administration, EPA is affirming our commitment to serve every American with equal dignity and respect.”

Many of the employees whose jobs are threatened in the Pacific Southwest Region work in what has been dubbed the Environmental Justice, Community Engagement and Environmental Review Division, a part of the regional office that saw hiring increase during the Biden administration.

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The staff there, among many things, work to ensure that poor and minority communities don’t bear the brunt of industrial pollution — for example, helping limit permitting of dirty factories and increasing enforcement of environmental regulations.

In recent weeks, the name of the division was changed — the word “justice” was dropped — to reflect the agency’s altered mission to do away with DEI.

The Pacific Southwest Region, which covers California, Arizona, Hawaii, Nevada and the Pacific Islands, consists of between 750 and 800 employees. Its headquarters is in San Francisco.

The cuts announced this week come on top of previous staff reductions at the regional office as part of Trump’s broader push to downsize the federal government.

In early February, nearly 50 probationary employees, those new to their positions, were let go, according to a former regional manager. Many worked, at least partly, on environmental justice issues. About a dozen have since been reinstated, according to the former manager.

Environmental justice programs have been a staple of the EPA as studies have increasingly shown that residents of poor and minority communities are disproportionately burdened by pollution. The result is often more health problems in these areas.

Bradley Angel, executive director of the San Francisco-based community group, Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, says the agency has helped in the fight to clean up toxic conditions at the old Navy shipyard in the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood.

“It took a while to get the EPA to pay attention to it, but they finally did,” he said. “There are toxic sites all over the Bay Area like this. The impact (of the planned cuts) will be enormous and devastating. Literally people could die and probably will die as a result of wiping out environmental regulatory oversight. It needs to be improved rather than be eliminated.”

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REPORTER



Kurtis Alexander is an enterprise reporter for The San Francisco Chronicle, with a focus on natural resources and the environment. He frequently writes about water, wildfire, climate and the American West. His recent work has examined the impacts of drought, threats to public lands and wildlife, and the nation's widening rural-urban divide.

Before joining the Chronicle, Alexander worked as a freelance writer and as a staff reporter for several media organizations, including The Fresno Bee and Bay Area News Group, writing about government, politics and the environment.

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