

VT EJ Advisory Council

2024 Progress Report

INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, the Vermont Environmental Justice (EJ) Advisory Council (AC), the Vermont Interagency Committee (IAC), and the Agency of Natural Resources' Civil Rights and Environmental Justice Unit (CREJU) have worked diligently to advance key objectives under Vermont's EJ Law—and beyond. While some achievements reflect required “deliverables,” we have also reached significant non-deliverable milestones that support our collective efforts. These accomplishments lay the foundation for meeting the law's more complex deliverables and move us closer to realizing the long-term goal of environmental justice for all Vermonters.

This report provides an overview of progress under the VT EJ Law for AC members to review before their one-on-one meetings with the EJ Coordinators in January 2025. We will also revisit and discuss this document in greater detail at the first AC public meeting in 2025.

This report:

- Outlines **Non-deliverable Accomplishments** that extend beyond the Vermont EJ Law's outlined requirements.
- Outlines **Deliverable Accomplishments** tied directly to **the five modes of influence** set forth by the VT EJ Law:

PART I: NON-DELIVERABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Below are achievements that, while not explicitly required by the VT EJ Law, have significantly advanced our collective EJ work.

- **Advocated for and Received Deadline & Meeting Extensions**
 - Successfully secured an increased meeting cap and a two-year deadline recalibration ([Act 181](#)). An act relating to community resilience and biodiversity protection through land use.

- This extension allows more thorough work on each deliverable and ensures robust public engagement.
- **Improved Facilitation & Engagement**
 - **Ashira Pelt** from the **Consensus Building Institute (CBI)** effectively facilitated two meetings under a contract with the U.S. **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**, which was initiated in response to earlier AC requests for external facilitation.
 - CREJU strengthened its relationship with the EPA's Environmental Justice, Community Health and Environmental Review (EJCHER) Division.
 - Established a **monthly schedule for public meetings**, improving consistency and clarity for AC, IAC, and the public.
 - CREJU successfully sent Doodle Polls for the September, October and November public meetings months in advance at the request of AC members.
 - CREJU provided unfacilitated time for AC members to meet at the November 2024 public meeting at their request.
 - EJ Coordinators tracked quorum to ensure the AC and IAC conducted business in compliance with Vermont's Open Meeting Law
- **Improved Feedback Mechanisms**
 - CREJU provided **Microsoft Forms** and **Mentimeter** polls approximately 5 times to gather input and to inform both substantive and procedural aspects of this work.
 - Provided an **informational session** with ANR's Climate Action Office to give AC members clarity on ways they can contribute to the Climate Superfund Act.
- **Improvements in Addressing AC Concerns**
 - CREJU made efforts to address AC concerns throughout the year based on lessons learned from one-on-one meetings with the EJ Coordinators in April 2024. CREJU will continue to improve on:

- Bringing in subject matter experts to provide clarity on technical topics
 - Using plain language
 - Providing more unfacilitated time for AC members during public meetings
 - Accommodations to support AC members who prefer different forms of communication when possible (e.g. texts, phone calls).
 - Sharing agenda-building and facilitation with AC members where possible
- Due to feedback from AC members at the November 2024 public meeting, CREJU sent Doodle Polls to AC members 6 weeks in advance of one-on-one meetings in January of 2025. CREJU will continue to do so in 2025.

PART II: DELIVERABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Below are achievements that have significantly advanced the 5 modes of influence established by the VT EJ Law.

- **Community Engagement**

- Held a Core Principles of Community Engagement (CPCE) public comment period (May to July) with two public meetings (one virtual, one hybrid) to collect oral feedback; written input gathered via ANR's website.
- CREJU conducted an extensive qualitative analysis of all public comments and developed a Responsiveness Summary and other documents to support ANR's internal work.
- CREJU hosted office hours for AC and IAC members to explain findings from the qualitative analysis.
- At August's public meeting, CREJU presented its public comment analysis and outlined the proposed CPCE revisions from public commenters to the AC and IAC.
- CREJU provided the AC and IAC with draft language reflecting public feedback to help them consider each proposed revision before the September public meeting.

- During the September public meeting, CREJU facilitated a collaborative review in which the AC and IAC made decisions on CREJU’s draft language.
 - CREJU convened a working group of AC and IAC members to finalize the language, and both bodies voted to approve the CPCE at the October public meeting. CREJU published the new CPCE shortly after.
 - Each Covered Agency will use the CPCE to guide the development of their community engagement plans in 2025.
- **Distribution of Environmental Benefits**
 - CREJU convened an Environmental Benefits Spending Guidance (EBSG) task group with AC and IAC members in June 2024.
 - The task group had in-depth discussions on scope, methodology, data needs, and challenges based on Key Decisions 1–5 of [A Guide to Creating the Guidance for Covered Agency Environmental Benefits Spending Reports](#) in the Spring.
 - In September, the task group began initial drafting, developing preliminary outlines for proposed methodology and procedural needs based on discussions from earlier meetings.
 - From October through November, the task group refined and expanded the guidance based on information gathered from other groups.
 - The task group designed group activities for AC and IAC members in public meetings to gather more information to tailor the drafting process.
 - From January to March 2025, the group is engaging teams across agencies to explore needs and gather feedback for a second round of edits, having met all deadlines thus far.
 - **Mitigation of Cumulative Environmental Burdens**
 - CREJU clarified shared goals and visions for the EJ Mapping Tool through several public meetings with AC and IAC. [Substantive feedback](#) was gathered through the Mentimeter tool.
 - In September and October, CREJU gathered information and consulted subject matter experts from the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), the Agency of Digital Services (ADS), and private consulting firms.

- CREJU finalized a joint mapping tool Request For Proposal (RFP) that included expertise in both with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Community Engagement expertise in October. CREJU shared an abbreviated version of this RFP with AC and IAC.
 - After receiving guidance from ADS, CREJU drafted a GIS-focused RFP in November, which is now awaiting approval.
 - CREJU began drafting an Engagement and Community Outreach RFP in November and has since completed multiple revisions.
- **Annual Reporting**
 - IAC members completed a first round of Civil Rights (CR) and Environmental Justice (EJ) complaint reporting in March 2024.
 - Ashira Pelt facilitated a discussion where AC members identified components of their formal response to the IAC's EJ & CR Complaint Reports in a public meeting.
 - CREJU supported the AC in convening a working group to finalize and send the AC's Recommendations Report to the IAC in May 2024.
 - IAC members discussed the AC's Recommendations Report at a public meeting.
 - CREJU supported the IAC in forming a working group to draft the IAC's reply to the AC which was then submitted in August 2024.
 - Covered agencies began improving complaint intake processes informed by AC feedback.
 - **Legislative Adaptation**
 - The AC and IAC discussed shared interests and visions for revising the EJFP definition at multiple public meetings.
 - CREJU arranged an AC-focused presentation from John Adams (VT Center for Geographic Information at ADS) to explain data challenges and potential approaches for consideration when discussing changes to the EJFP definition.
 - CREJU clarified the timeline for AC turnover.