Honorable Phil Scott, Governor
Senate President Pro Tempore, Rebecca Balint
Speaker of the House of Representatives, Jill Krowinski
Commissioner, Agency of Natural Resources, Julie Moore
Executive Director of Racial Equity, Xusana Davis
Commissioner of Agency of Natural Resources, Peter Walke
Commissioner of Department of Health, Mark Levine
Secretary of Administration, Chair, Vermont Climate Council, Suzanne Young

Sent via email

RE: Centering Racial Justice and Equity in Vermont Climate and Environmental Policy

We write this letter as members of the VT Renews BIPOC Council, a collective of experts on environmental justice advising and supporting the Vermont Renews project and the Renew New England platform.

The Renew New England Alliance is a new and growing coalition of more than 150 leading grassroots organizations, labor unions, racial justice groups, frontline communities, and environmental advocates. We've come together to address our region's overlapping crises: mass unemployment, racial injustice, the coronavirus pandemic, and climate change. VT Renews, itself, has a robust statewide partnership that is collectively developing bill proposals for the state in the areas of Housing Justice, Food Justice, and Green Justice Zones.

The Vermont Renews BIPOC Council, which includes more than a dozen members from across the state, was established because Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and those facing systemic inequities, are disproportionately affected by environmental injustices including climate change. The negative impacts of this crisis are lethal to our communities. Because we have borne so much of the burden of injustice, the work of addressing our climate crisis should primarily center on the needs, experiences, and voices of our BIPOC and other socially marginalized communities. Furthermore, any policies and processes intended to mitigate the climate crisis should be designed to heal the generational harms of white supremacy and other extractive societal structures.

In 2020, the world was shaken due to the novel coronavirus. The experience of COVID added an additional layer to the cumulative burdens disproportionately placed on BIPOC and low-income communities. The pandemic also affected our approach to work in significant ways, one of the most crucial being the ability to share actual space, dialogue, and to come into community with one another. Deliberative, intimate dialogue is central to different ways of learning, listening to each other, and honoring our varied cultural norms and ways of being. What we have found is that the pandemic has thrown our best-laid plans into a challenging space that increases the pressure to continue on an accelerated time frame determined and enacted without due public engagement of those most affected.

Our communities have made it clear that no decisions about our lives should be made without our direct engagement. This demand requires the State to be responsive to procedural justice, which means being inclusive, responsive, intentionally listening and engaging in dialogue, self-care, and healing of our communities as we navigate these challenges. Although we don't want to slow down our overall response to climate change, the processes must move forward in a way that centers meaningful engagement of the communities that are most impacted by these challenges.

We are in the midst of reckoning around systemic racism and white supremacy in our nation. This work is challenging; it is mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing for us to manage. It is for this reason that we feel we must raise concerns around the ways the State is responding to environmental justice demands and its engagement with BIPOC experts:

- The demands that the State makes places an exceptionally high toll on BIPOC individuals in Vermont because of the lack of commitment on the part of the State to effectively engage the BIPOC community, by taking the input in a meaningful way that would lead towards solutions that furthers the most disadvantaged communities/population in the state. We need space to ensure that this work is healing. Any work that is not healing for BIPOC communities and the leaders at this table doing this is the wrong work.
- We need the space to explore the policy demands to ensure that they reflect the needs of our communities. There are times in which the difference in our communities may produce competing desires. We believe it requires having deep conversations and building relationships that allow us to be in solidarity with each other.
- Most of the BIPOC experts in this group are asked to provide significant labor to meet the State's demands while being unpaid or under-compensated for this labor.

In response to these concerns, we wish to state the following expectations for policy under consideration:

- That the State commits to meaningfully pursuing procedural justice so that BIPOC subject matter experts may engage in these processes in ways that enable us to take better care of ourselves and our communities;
- That the State apply racial justice vision, policy, and leadership in addressing the climate crisis with COVID response decisiveness;
- That any jobs created from new or existing policies to address the climate crisis will pay a living wage of a minimum of $15 per hour or the prevailing wage and support organized labor;
- That racial justice and equity be central to any proposals made, and that the State explicitly prioritize most impacted communities in the production of those mandates;
- That the State make an unequivocal commitment to the immediate cessation of ongoing environmental harms identified as the State works towards strategies for restoration and revitalization;
- That the Climate Council's decision-making body recognizes that advisory subcommittees do not resolve or adequately compensate for exclusion and gross inequity in appointments. Therefore, subcommittee members must have a vote on their

committee and meaningful role in decision-making throughout. Moreover, future nomination processes must be significantly more inclusive, allowing for true representation in decision-making roles from most impacted communities.

- That it be further recognized that the continued segregation of BIPOC leaders within advisory roles upholds the narrative of white supremacy. It stifles the ability of the Climate Council to effectively arrive at impactful climate decisions that also protect BIPOC communities.
- That policies brought forth by BIPOC communities to address the climate crisis be meaningfully reviewed and considered as a priority within committees of jurisdiction.

We look forward to dialogues with you about these concerns and the collaborative work ahead to better craft a just future for all of us. Do not hesitate to contact us to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

VT Renews BIPOC Advisory Council

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Beverly Little Thunder, Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs
Divya Gudur, Middlebury College
Dr. Bindu Pannikar, University of Vermont
Hon. Brian Cina, Vermont State Representative
Iris Hsiang, Vermont Public Interest Research Group, Vermont Youth Lobby
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