



Salem County Environmental Justice Community Engagement Session

Where: PSEG Energy and Environmental Resource Center, 244 Chestnut Street, Salem, NJ 08079

When: September 12, 2023 @ 6:00pm-7:30pm

Approximately 26 participants in-person and 28 participants online via Zoom

Summary: Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Commissioner Shawn LaTourette, DEP Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) Director Kandyce Perry and EPA Region 2 Administrator Lisa Garcia led a community engagement session with residents of Salem County to discuss environmental justice.

Question & Answer Session

1. A Salem resident raised two concerns about water quality and drainage.

- a. The participant raised a concern regarding the potential privatization of the Salem City water-sewer utility. He expressed that private companies could raise prices and make it difficult for residents to pay their water bills because senior citizens and many other residents rely on a fixed income. He highlighted that the city has already raised water prices twice and taxes have also increased. He asked if there were any funds or grants available to prevent privatization or build a new plant.

The participant expressed concerns over a drainage ditch spanning from Anderson Drive to Keasbey Street that has not been dug out since 1996. He said that the ditch is supposed to be 10 feet in depth, however because the ditch had not been maintained, it has not been draining and led to a mosquito issue and reduced quality of life. He explained the community has been told by the city that they are unable to dig out the ditch because they are unable to determine where to place the soil, despite white neighborhoods not having this issue. He highlighted that he is spending \$12,000 to pump the water from his home in addition to his electric bills, taxes, and high water bills.

Response: The DEP acknowledges the concern and explains that the Community Collaborative Initiative (CCI) has a liaison for Salem City that will assist in exploring the drainage issue. DEP will follow up to explore if there are wetlands permitting concerns and issues with where to dispose of the dirt. DEP also acknowledged concerns about the privatization of the water system and

requested to reserve response until after other residents with concerns about the privatization were also heard.

2. This participant raised two concerns over PFAS.

- a. The participant expressed frustration concerning her understanding of a litigation outcome against DuPont over PFAS. She expressed how she thought the penalty was minor and felt that DuPont received a slap on the wrist with a \$300,000 fine and a requirement to build a boat ramp by DEP. She went on to highlight how there are marginalized communities that reside on the Salem River. The participant said they will share materials they found.

Response: The Commissioner explained that litigation against DuPont from the 2019 complaint is still ongoing and has not yet been resolved. He expresses that the DEP is diligently working to ensure DuPont pays an adequate penalty.

- b. The participant raised concerns over the health of residents from being exposed to PFAS in their water. She highlighted that the average income of residents is \$24,000 and they have been receiving notices about elevated PFAS levels in their water via mail. She asked how to keep people safe from the exposures and emphasized that DuPont has not worked to assist the community. She went on to say that “it feels like we are not part of this state” and that the community is continuously told that it is not an issue.

Response: The Commissioner highlighted New Jersey’s strides in addressing PFAS water contamination by [setting strict maximum containment levels \(MCLs\)](#) and requiring municipalities to notify residents when the water does not meet the standard. He expresses how the DEP does not wish water treatment facilities and residents to be burdened by the costs and that lawsuits ensure that polluters are financially responsible. The Commissioner explains that [the DEP can assist residents if their well has contaminants in it.](#)

3. **Question:** The participant raises concerns over the inequitable opportunity for outdoor recreation on a manmade beach on the shore of the Delaware river in Elsinboro Township called Oakwood Beach. He describes how access to the beach is restricted with private and municipal signs, the lack of parking space, no bathrooms, and restricted hours that consequently make it illegal to sit on the beach and watch the sunset that residents enjoy. He asked if the township is in violation of the DEP and the Army Corps of Engineers laws. He promised to share his analysis with OEJ via email.

Response: The Commissioner affirms that everyone in New Jersey has a right to access the beaches. He said that the DEP will examine the issue and assist if there is non-compliance with the public access law.

4. **Question:** An attendee, who owns a few businesses, raised concerns over the expensive costs of septic systems in Salem County, particularly for food vendors, which has caused the area to become a food desert. He explains that more food businesses, such as grocery stores and restaurants, are closing than those opening due to the costs. He emphasizes that he is not asking for a relaxation of regulations. He asks if it is possible to support people to meet septic requirements, especially in rural areas.

Response: The Commissioner emphasized the need for the septic system regulations as the increased size of the septic systems protects the wetland. He discussed how while economic growth and environmental protection are often presented as two extremes, there is a balance in the middle. He said that businesses may need support to meet the standards and that the government should develop a plan for this support. The EPA Region 2 Administrator added that there is federal money flowing through New Jersey that may be available.

5. **This participant raised two questions**

- a. Which community is most in need and the most inequitable?

Response: The Commissioner said that there is no singular answer and that each place has different concerns. He added that some problems are similar, and some are very different and assured the participant that the DEP is working diligently to address these issues.

- b. The participant asked how communities can be able to weigh in on creating solutions. She explained that there was an architect who pitched a low-cost solution to a water quality issue, but the solution was not favored by the government. She gave another example of wanting to buy a building that fell into disrepair so they would be able to remediate it themselves as no actions were being taken by the local government, however the municipality prohibited them from acquiring the property. She emphasized that citizens want to be able to be part of the solution, however the local government prevents them from doing so.

Response: The Commissioner highlighted how engaged groups of residents are crucial because there is often a lack of staffing at the local level to take advantage of resources and other funding that may be available through the state and federal governments. He explained that the [Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers \(TCTAC\)](#) program funded by the EPA in region 2 by WE ACT for Environmental Justice will soon be functional to help communities navigate funding and resource opportunities. He also suggested to [sign up for the OEJ newsletter](#) where opportunities are also shared.

6. **Question:** An attendee asked if it was possible for advocates to have a communication channel with the OEJ director as it is very difficult to hold local officials accountable.

Response: OEJ Director Kandyce Perry brought attention to the OEJ environmental justice email environmentaljustice@dep.nj.gov and affirmed that the office reads every email and that someone will respond.

7. **Question:** A participant asked if there was any funding available to assist residents who have been exposed to PFAS contaminated water. She explained that residents in the area are becoming ill and that it is possibly a cancer cluster. She additionally asked if the New Jersey Department of Health had any programs to help people get tested for PFAS or heavy metal blood serum levels since the tests are expensive.

Response: The Commissioner explained that is very likely that everyone in the room has elevated PFAS levels in their blood due to PFAS being in multiple sources. The DEP and EPA are working to identify where PFAS contamination is from because water is not the only source. The DEP does not have any monitoring or testing programs. The DEP is working to ensure that PFAS is not circulating. The commissioner mentioned a [PFAS health research study from Rutgers](#) that DEP might want to inquire about for potential expansion.

8. **Question:** An attendee says he is a lead inspector licensed by the DCA and EPA, and that he drove down from Jersey City to attend this community engagement session. He explained that he has been experiencing difficulties when communicating with municipalities when he attempts to offer his services and gets little response.

Answer: The Commissioner and Kandyce Perry suggest communications offline about this issue with the DEP.

Follow-Up Items for NJDEP and EPA Region 2

- Follow up with the resident who raised the concern about the drainage ditch and ensure they are connected with the Community Collaborative Initiative liaison for Salem.
- Follow-up with DEP's Watershed and Land Management Program to investigate potential non-compliance of the public access law for the made-made beach
- Follow up with the resident who raised concerns over the high cost of maintaining septic systems and assist in identifying possible funds.
- Share Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center information with engagement session participants
- Share participants' concerns about affordable lead blood level test options with the NJ Department of Health and explore opportunities.