

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Introduction

Chairman Westerman, Vice Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of President Biden’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 Budget for the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you today.

Congress established CEQ more than fifty years ago to advise the President on environmental policy, document and define changes in the natural environment, and help coordinate environmental policies and programs across the Federal government. In particular, the law establishing CEQ – the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 – directs CEQ “to develop and recommend to the President national policies to foster and promote the improvement of environmental quality to meet the conservation, social, economic, health, and other requirements and goals of the Nation.”

Some of the specific environmental challenges we face today are different than they were half a century ago, but many of our goals and much of our focus remains the same. Our nation’s rivers no longer catch on fire, yet we have much work to do to bring them back to full health and to rid our waterways and drinking water systems of toxic chemicals. Our skies are no longer blanketed by acid rain-producing sulfur dioxide, but now we must slash the greenhouse gas emissions that are warming our climate and the toxic pollution that imperils our communities. Our country has successfully saved hundreds of wildlife species from extinction, yet natural areas and wildlife habitat are continuing to rapidly disappear, and safe and accessible outdoor opportunities remain out of reach for too many.

CEQ’s mission – to help deliver clean water, clean air, and a healthy environment for all people in our country – is as important today as it ever has been. That is why I am so proud of the work we have done over the past three and a half years under President Biden and Vice President Harris’s leadership. Much of the progress we have made at CEQ and across the Administration on these critical issues – from improving the efficiency and effectiveness of environmental reviews to tackling so-called forever chemicals, or PFAS – has been enabled by bipartisan collaboration with Congress and historic investments from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), the CHIPS and Science Act (CHIPS), and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

President Biden's Fiscal Year 2025 Budget

Today, I will talk about our priorities and progress at CEQ, how this work is helping advance the President's climate, conservation, and environmental justice agenda for our country, and the areas on which we intend to focus in FY 2025.

The President has proposed a budget of \$4.676 million in discretionary appropriations for CEQ, an increase of \$47,000 from the FY 2024 enacted budget. The FY 2025 budget builds on critical investments in the IRA (P.L. 117–169) and supports the following priorities and goals for the country:

- Confronting climate change, accelerating the deployment of clean energy and vital infrastructure, and improving environmental review and permitting processes;
- Delivering clean air, clean water, and a healthy environment for all; and
- Supporting locally led conservation of our nation's lands, waters, and wildlife.

Confronting Climate Change, Accelerating the Deployment of Clean Energy and Vital Infrastructure, and Improving Environmental Review and Permitting Processes

Thanks to President Biden's leadership and Congress's passage of several landmark pieces of legislation over the past three and a half years, the Administration is making once-in-a-generation investments to accelerate clean energy deployment and fight climate change, rebuild our nation's crumbling infrastructure, and create millions of good-paying jobs.

CEQ is proud to play a key role in advancing this work. Within the Federal government, CEQ's Federal Chief Sustainability Office is helping Federal agencies lead by example by powering more government facilities with clean energy, shifting Federal fleets to zero- and low-emission vehicles, and meeting other objectives that President Biden set in Executive Order 14057, *Catalyzing Clean Energy Industries and Jobs Through Federal Sustainability*. We have been pleased to work with the U.S. Postal Service, for example, as it builds the world's largest electric delivery vehicle fleet. The Postal Service is currently planning to transition 66,000 vehicles to electric over the next five years, which will result in cleaner air in communities and lower costs for the agency. We are also working with agencies to help them develop and implement adaptation and resilience plans to better protect Federal facilities and the communities in which they are located from the impacts of climate change. We have worked, for example, with the Office of Science and Technology Policy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to provide agencies and the public with a new flood mapping tool and a climate risk tool that helps illustrate climate risks over the years ahead.

CEQ is also helping accelerate the deployment of clean energy and other vital infrastructure by working to modernize Federal permitting and environmental review processes. We recognize the need to permit and build things – quickly and well – to upgrade our transportation infrastructure, confront the climate crisis, close the digital divide, bolster our energy security, and advance our industrial policy.

That is why President Biden launched his Permitting Action Plan in 2022, and has directed his Cabinet and senior staff to be directly and fully engaged to address any delays and bottlenecks in permitting, simplify and improve permitting processes, and direct appropriate resources and attention to get projects built well and on time.

The Administration's focus on permitting is delivering results. The IRA dedicated nearly \$1 billion to boost permitting capacity at Federal agencies. With these investments, we have already expanded the Federal permitting workforce by 14%, we are incorporating new, more efficient technology, and we are improving coordination of permitting processes.

In addition to the investments in permitting that the Administration is making with the help of the IRA, we were also pleased to work with Congress on a bipartisan basis to enact – as part of the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) of 2023 – the most significant changes to NEPA since the law was enacted in 1970. Earlier this month, CEQ finalized the Bipartisan Permitting Reform Implementation (BPRI) Rule, which fully implements these bipartisan reforms, as well as additional reforms that will modernize and accelerate the permitting process. Altogether, these streamlining efforts will help us drive forward the infrastructure we need for our future. I will briefly highlight four major features of these reforms in the BPRI rule.

First, the reforms we made in the BPRI rule will improve the efficiency and speed of environmental reviews. The rule will accelerate review of all projects, including clean energy, transmission, clean water, broadband, transportation, and other crucial infrastructure. It does so by setting clear deadlines and page limits for environmental reviews; charging the lead Federal agency for each project with coordinating a unified and efficient environmental review process; allowing agencies to share categorical exclusions, which unlocks faster reviews for projects that do not have significant environmental effects; establishing new and more flexible methods for agencies to create categorical exclusions that will speed up projects without significant adverse effects; expanding the use of programmatic environmental reviews; and encouraging lower levels of environmental review when a project's effects can be mitigated.

Second, our reforms in the BPRI rule will facilitate better environmental outcomes, not by dictating the outcome of any particular decision-making process, but by improving Federal decision making across the board. The rule clarifies that agencies should consider climate change effects in environmental reviews, which courts have already required agencies to do, look at alternatives that would reduce a project's climate impacts, and evaluate how to ensure that projects are designed to withstand climate change. The rule also makes sure that agencies conduct the proper level of environmental review and that the review focuses on the most consequential effects of the proposed action.

Third, the rule advances environmental justice and promotes meaningful – and early – public input. We know that community buy-in helps make sure projects are built smart from the start, improving project design and avoiding conflicts that can result in litigation and delays.

Fourth and finally, the BPRI rule reverses provisions of a rule, issued in 2020, that were legally uncertain and jeopardized community input. Along with steps we took two years ago to clarify and restore basic safeguards for environmental reviews and guidance we issued to agencies last

year on how to account for climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, the BPRI rule will help ensure that more projects get built right the first time.

I am grateful for all the input and comments that helped inform the BPRI rule. The rule strikes the right balance between expediting the permitting process and ensuring informed decision making to meet NEPA's environmental stewardship and national policy goals. It will deliver more efficiency and certainty for project sponsors, more tools to Federal agencies, and better projects and decisions for communities.

We are already working with agencies and will continue to do so over the next year to implement more efficient and effective environmental reviews as set forth in the BRPI rule. This includes supporting agencies as they update their NEPA implementing procedures, develop new categorical exclusions, and strengthen and modernize their NEPA programs; developing environmental review and permitting trainings for agency staff; and helping agencies explore technology updates to make permitting more efficient, including building on the work begun at the Environmental Permitting Technology and Data Summit that CEQ held last fall.

Delivering Clean Air, Clean Water, and a Healthy Environment for All

In addition to helping accelerate the deployment of clean energy and vital infrastructure, CEQ is working to deliver a healthy and safe environment for all communities. In particular, CEQ is helping Federal agencies advance policies, programs, and practices to confront longstanding environmental injustices and inequities and to better protect people from pollution and environmental harms. This is resulting in real and meaningful progress in communities across the country.

With President Biden's and Vice President Harris's leadership, CEQ is supporting Federal agencies' work to address and prevent disproportionate and adverse environmental and health impacts in communities – now and in the future. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) recently finalized standards that will cut toxic pollution from chemical plants, which will reduce the number of people at heightened risk for cancer. Additionally, the EPA has finalized a ban on asbestos and established the first national standard for PFAS in drinking water.

In addition to the Administration's work to tighten pollution standards, CEQ is supporting agencies in mobilizing once-in-a-generation funding and resources from the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to transform our country for the better. Communities are experiencing the benefits of these historic investments right now. In rural and urban communities across the nation, former industrial and energy sites that were once sources of blight and pollution are being transformed, thanks to new funding to tackle legacy pollution and remediate environmental harms. This includes investments to clean up Superfund and brownfield sites, reclaim abandoned mine land, and cap orphaned oil and gas wells. At the same time, we are working to ensure a future where every child and family lives without the fear and harmful effects of lead in drinking water by investing billions of dollars to replace every lead pipe in the country.

As part of the President's commitment to environmental justice, CEQ is also focused on strengthening government-wide technical assistance and capacity building, which is helping communities across the country access these historic resources. The White House Office of Environmental Justice at CEQ is coordinating implementation of environmental justice policy across the Federal government, including delivering on the President's vision for the Justice40 Initiative. Directed by Executive Order 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, the Justice40 Initiative is reshaping how the Federal government ensures communities that have been historically left behind and faced underinvestment see the benefits of Federal investments. There are 518 programs across 19 federal agencies that are currently being reimagined and transformed through the Justice40 Initiative to maximize benefits to disadvantaged communities.

Since President Biden signed Executive Order 14096, *Revitalizing Our Nation's Commitment to Environmental Justice for All*, last spring, CEQ has been pleased to work with agencies to conduct assessments of their environmental justice efforts by developing, implementing, and updating Environmental Justice Strategic Plans. To promote transparency and accountability, CEQ published a template for Federal agencies, drawing on leading practices and recommendations created by government performance and planning experts. Its purpose is to ensure that agencies use planning and performance measures that will pave the way for effective implementation for years to come.

CEQ is also working to improve the information and data that the Federal government needs to address environmental injustice and to better protect all communities from the impacts of pollution and climate change. In particular, CEQ led the development of the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST), which Federal agencies use to identify disadvantaged communities that can benefit from the Justice40 Initiative. Through partnerships with other Federal agencies and institutions, CEQ is also working to bolster national data on the cumulative and disproportionate impacts of climate change, pollution, environmental, and socioeconomic burdens on disadvantaged communities, and to help ensure the government uses these data effectively to reduce burdens and improve outcomes for communities with environmental justice concerns.

Though much work remains to fulfill the President's vision of clean air, clean water, and healthy communities for all people, thanks to these efforts we are seeing real, positive change in communities across the country.

Supporting Locally Led Conservation and Restoration of our Lands and Waters

In his first days in office, President Biden established the country's first national conservation goal to protect, conserve, and restore at least 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. To reach this goal, the Administration launched the America the Beautiful Initiative, a call to action to conserve and restore the nation's lands and waters for the benefit of all people through locally led, voluntary, collaborative conservation efforts.

Since the launch of the America the Beautiful Initiative, the United States has experienced some of the most rapid conservation progress in our nation's history, with more than 41 million acres of land and water conserved in just over three years. This work is happening at all levels of

government. Last month, ten states, eight Tribes, and 24 local governments became inaugural members of the Administration's America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge, which supports Tribal, state, and local efforts to protect and restore the nation's lakes, rivers, streams, estuaries, and wetlands.

Thanks to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act, the Administration is investing more than \$10 billion to support locally led conservation and restoration efforts. To help communities access this historic funding, the Administration launched Conservation.gov, a new information hub that connects people with tools to advance meaningful conservation and restoration work on the ground. Built through an interagency partnership that CEQ helped lead, the website offers opportunities for the public to learn about conservation efforts underway across the country, explore outdoor recreation and volunteer opportunities, and apply for financial assistance in support of conservation projects.

Conservation.gov also houses the new American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas, an innovative tool that illustrates locally led, partnership-driven conservation and restoration work underway in communities across the nation. The Atlas also includes a preliminary framework for tracking progress towards the nation's conservation goals.

The Administration's conservation work includes a wide range of approaches that meet the needs of communities. This ranges from taking action to protect 9.3 million acres of the world's largest intact temperate rainforest in Alaska to planting trees in urban nature-deprived neighborhoods. It includes working to address long-standing litigation in the Columbia River Basin and strengthening efforts to restore salmon to healthy and abundant levels. It also includes expanding enrollment in working lands programs, as well as withdrawing sensitive areas – such as the Thompson Divide in Colorado – from future mineral development. Notably, conservation across the country has been driven by local efforts of ranchers, farmers, fishers, forest owners, Tribal Nations, communities, and others to safeguard the health and integrity of the lands and waters upon which we all depend.

Conclusion

CEQ is proud to be working to deliver a healthy environment for all, to help conserve and restore our lands and waters, and to accelerate a clean energy economy that will combat climate change and make our communities more resilient. Overall, with the FY25 budget request, CEQ will be well-positioned to help advance the President's climate, conservation, and environmental justice agenda for our country.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to our continued partnership and welcome any questions you may have.