

August 5, 2021

From: BEA Grassroots Caucus
To: NRDC, UCS
CC: BEA Participants, Bezos Earth Fund

Building Equity and Alignment for Environmental Justice (BEA), led by our membership of 85 grassroots organizations, works with national environmental “Green” institutions and environmental philanthropy to redistribute power and funding more equitably within the environmental justice movement and to center grassroots leadership more directly. The grassroots are at the forefront of critical environmental issues and BEA wants to elevate that. Frontline communities must be at the forefront of developing solutions. We champion grassroots’ access to power, money, and visibility as they make sustainable impact in the marginalized communities they serve and in policy that broadly benefits other environmental justice (EJ) communities and advances essential climate justice goals for all. We must hold big greens accountable and challenge funder-led projects, ensuring that grantmaking decisions are informed and led by grassroots needs. For a decade, BEA has worked to uplift and insist upon equity as an essential value, especially for environmental philanthropy.

Environmental justice organizations and communities of color are leading influential campaigns and initiatives aimed at protecting public health, developing stronger climate and environmental policies, and building new economies rooted in Just Transition principles. Despite the EJ movement’s tremendous record of successful action that has led to milestone EJ victories and built the power of the climate and EJ movements, philanthropy often misunderstands or overlooks the power and scale of grassroots EJ organizations. Institutional racism is a key factor in this dynamic and leads to chronic under-resourcing of BIPOC-led organizations. As a result, funding disparities persist, and the most important voices acting on behalf of equitably stopping, mitigating, and adapting climate change and environmental degradation are often excluded from critical decision-making processes.

BEA’s [recent study](#) of the underlying dynamics of misalignment between the philanthropic and EJ sectors in the Midwest and Gulf South regions confirms that environmental funders are largely granting to mainstream environmental organizations (99%), with just a tiny fraction (1%) going to EJ organizations and [an even smaller fraction \(less than 0.5%\) going to Tribal Communities](#). Our research has been leveraged by the Donors of Color Network for the [Climate Funders Justice pledge](#) to call on the top 40 climate funders in the country to commit to transparently reporting on their grants and increasing funding of BIPOC-led powerbuilding groups to at least 30% within two years.

We have made a lot of space to share our concerns with you through meetings and emails with Grassroots Caucus participants and staff members. In December 2020, BEA participant Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) issued a [statement](#) explaining the harm that comes from the Earth Fund funneling over \$600 million (so far) to organizations that support market-based schemes and techno-fix approaches to the climate crisis, while ignoring consultation with environmental justice communities. CJA’s statement

also was a call to recipients of Earth Fund dollars to not follow the status-quo and instead redirect 10-25% of Earth Fund monies to the frontlines. This call holds particular significance to your organizations who, as BEA Green Caucus participants, have committed to several EJ value statements over the past several decades, including the [17 Principles of Environmental Justice](#), the [Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing](#), and the [Building Equity & Alignment for Impact Initiative](#). For seven months, we have shared our concerns, asked for action, and patiently waited for you to come to the table and take action in line with the values you subscribe to as participants in BEA. We feel you have not done so in an equitable manner. We are deeply disappointed in your lackluster response to calls for the fair distribution of Earth Fund dollars.

As a signatory of the Equitable and Just National Climate Platform, NRDC has pledged to “center racial, economic, and environmental justice” and to be “an authentic ally to frontline communities.” In NRDC’s own words:

“Authentic allyship includes holding ourselves accountable. To that end, we are recommitting ourselves to amplifying Black, Indigenous, Latino, and Asian voices; to looking at all of our work, not just some, through the eyes of justice; to protecting the ancestral—stolen—lands of Indigenous People; and to ensuring the benefits of a clean energy economy are accessible to all.”
-- from NRDC’s Commitment to Racial and Environmental Justice, <https://www.nrdc.org/nrdcs-commitment-racial-and-environmental-justice>

UCS publicly states strong support for environmental justice partners:

“The legacy of white supremacy continues to harm those of us who are African American, Native American, Latinx, or members of other racially marginalized groups. These communities face unjust burdens that include violence, disenfranchisement, economic oppression and exploitation, unequal access to resources such as health care and education, and disproportionate exposure to environmental risks. Many of these burdens intersect directly with the work UCS does.... Ending these inequities must be an integral part of our mission and our daily work. And a commitment to facing facts means we must be willing to talk about racism explicitly, listen to those who've been hurt by it, and confront it both in the world we seek to change and in our own assumptions and actions. UCS as an organization has not always lived up to these ideals and is working to do better.”
-- from Working to Advance Racial Equity, <https://ucsusa.org/about/racial-equity>.

Despite these public statements of deep allyship, on an institutional level you have failed to work with us. Below is a list of the ways you have failed us and our demands:

1. The funds pledged to BEA were disappointing - The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) provided \$500,000, or just 0.5% of the \$100M it received from Earth Fund. The Union

of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has pledged \$500,000, just 3.3% of the \$15M it received from Earth Fund. We are deeply disappointed not only in the small commitments you have offered, but in the extensive time it has taken you to respond to our demands, given that you received these funds in October 2020. What is even more frustrating is that these are not new conversations. There has been a decade of organizing work that could have moved on, and your participation in BEA included a commitment to supporting EJ organizing and vision of the BEA. These are not new themes or issues in the field or within your organizations. We expected more and we demand you do better.

2. As Green Caucus participants of the BEA, your organizations should give significantly larger amounts of funds to the BEA fund and other grassroots partners, as well as provide transparency about how much of your funds are shared with EJ groups by detailing organizations funded and amounts provided to them, for Earth Fund dollars and your budget overall. Your lack of transparency diminishes any accountability to our grassroots partners. When large national environmental organizations like yours see opportunities for significant funding, they need to respond by insisting that their funders talk about climate justice and direct them to our partners in the frontlines. This can include sending a letter to your existing funders as a form of introducing equitable practices and directly addressing commitments to grassroots organizing.
3. We call on potential corporate funders, such as the Earth Fund, to correct these injustices going forward by providing funding directly to frontline communities or social justice/environmental justice intermediaries selected by the grassroots, such as the BEA Fund and the Fund for Frontline Power at Solutions Project. This is a question of equity. When large companies like Amazon, using vehicles such as the Earth Fund, invest \$10B to address climate change, that commitment must be matched by an equal investment of \$10B in frontline communities who are at the forefront not only of impacts from environmental harm but also in developing real solutions to change course. When funding is available that significantly changes the landscape of the environmental movement, the conversation must be moved to not only include, but provide a matching investment in, environmental justice work.
4. Finally, the Grassroots Caucus participants request a meeting with the CEOs of NRDC and UCS along with appropriate staff who manage grants and corporate gifts, to discuss ways to address inequities within fund distribution. We are committed to engaging in deeper conversations on opportunities and strategies for equitable funding.

The BEA is working in alignment with partners and allies in the field, such as Climate Justice Alliance, to ensure equity is central to decisions that will affect our members. The BEA's membership encompasses 85 grassroots organizations and networks representing 200+ base-building and frontline groups working on

the ground and successfully creating healthier communities and building alignment across millions of residents in the United States and Tribal Communities. As a group led by organizers, we know that the best solutions are created when communities are at the center of decision-making. This letter is one example of our collective work and a calling-in to support on-the-ground organizing directly and match equity commitments through a fair distribution of funds.

Signed

BEA [Grassroots Caucus](#)