

Impact of Current Environmental Justice Policies on the Latino Community in Georgia

Introduction

Environmental justice (EJ) policies, programs, and priorities ensure that no group of people bears a disproportionate share of negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental, or commercial operations. All people living in the United States should have equal access to a healthy environment. In Georgia, Latino communities—like many communities of color—are increasingly impacted by environmental issues including air and water pollution, hazardous waste, and climate change, yet often face barriers in accessing the protections afforded by existing policies and programs.

Current Environmental Justice Policies

Under the Trump Administration (January 2025 onward), the Environmental Protection Agency rescinded all federal-level environmental justice mandates, including the core definition of EJ (“fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income...”):

- **Executive Order 14173** (“Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity”) revoked Executive Order 12898, eliminating federal mandates requiring agencies to identify and address adverse environmental justice impacts.¹
- **Executive Order 14148** (“Initial Rescissions of Harmful Executive Orders and Actions”) rescinded Executive Order 14096, which had built on Clinton’s Executive Order 12898 to embed environmental justice across federal agencies.¹
- **Executive Order 14151** (“Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing”) ordered agencies to terminate all DEI and Environmental Justice offices, positions, committees, budgets, grants, and programs.

Before these actions, the EPA defined environmental justice as “...the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation...of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” That definition has since been removed from EPA guidance and websites.

Impact on the Latino Community in Georgia

Air Pollution and Industrial Sites

Many Latino communities in Georgia are located near industrial zones, highways, and waste disposal sites, which contribute to high levels of air pollution. In areas like Metro Atlanta, where Latino populations have grown significantly, exposure to pollutants like particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, and ozone is a significant concern.

Additionally, many families experience issues with mold and unhealthy indoor air quality and lack access to heat or air conditioning—creating breathing and pulmonary problems for many individuals, particularly children. Although federal EJ policies mandate that environmental protections be enforced in disadvantaged communities, Georgia has struggled with effective monitoring and enforcement, leaving many Latino neighborhoods vulnerable.

Water Quality and Contamination

Water contamination, particularly from lead and industrial runoff (including poultry processing), disproportionately affects Latino communities in Georgia. Some Latino neighborhoods in urban areas and agricultural regions are exposed to contaminated water sources due to outdated infrastructure and insufficient state-level monitoring. Despite federal environmental justice initiatives that emphasize equitable access to clean water, state policies and funding mechanisms often fail to prioritize cleanup of these areas or provide sufficient resources to address the needs of Latino communities.

Rural, low-income communities in Northeast Georgia—often with fewer resources—are at higher risk of pollution exposure, including foul odors, flies, and degraded waterways stemming directly from poultry runoff. Latino communities bear disproportionate exposure to hazardous pollutants from poultry plants, and fear of retaliation and immigration enforcement undermines meaningful involvement in decision-making when it comes to advocating for better conditions in the region.²

Climate Change and Resilience

Latinos in Georgia, many of whom work in agriculture, construction, and service industries, are highly vulnerable to the impacts of extreme heat, flooding, and hurricanes. The lack of robust climate resilience planning in Georgia means that Latino communities are often excluded from adaptation strategies. Implementation of climate resilience programs at the state level remains inconsistent, and many Latino neighborhoods are left behind in planning and resource allocation.

Barriers to Participation

Federal EJ policies encourage the inclusion of all communities in environmental decision-making. However, language barriers, limited access to resources, and fear of retaliation often prevent Latino residents in Georgia from participating in public hearings or advocacy efforts. The lack of culturally competent outreach and representation in environmental policy decisions means their concerns are frequently overlooked. Additionally, local government entities sometimes fail to engage effectively with the Latino community, undermining the goals of meaningful participation outlined in EJ policies.

Legal and Political Advocacy

The Latino community in Georgia has faced significant challenges in advocating for environmental justice, often due to limited legal resources and the complexity of navigating environmental regulations. However, local organizations—including advocacy groups focused on immigrant rights and environmental health—have been working to address these issues. These organizations are crucial in bridging the gap between federal policies and local realities, though they often operate with limited resources.

Conclusion

While federal environmental justice policies theoretically aim to protect Latino communities in Georgia from disproportionate environmental harms, actual implementation is often hindered by state-level inaction, insufficient enforcement, and barriers to community participation. As a result, Latino communities in Georgia continue to face significant environmental challenges. Effective policy reform should focus on improving local enforcement of environmental regulations, increasing access to clean water and air, ensuring the inclusion of Latino voices in decision-making processes, and addressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change. Addressing these gaps is critical to ensuring that the goals of environmental justice are met for Latino communities in Georgia.

References & Sources

- [1] Harvard Law School Environmental and Energy Law Program. (2025). "Rollback of Federal Environmental Justice Mandates Under Executive Orders 14173 and 14148." <https://eelp.law.harvard.edu>
- [2] Georgia Recorder. (2024). "Poultry Pollution and Environmental Justice in Rural Georgia." <https://georgiarecorder.com>