

# The HEAL Act would put environmental justice on the map in Washington state

March 25, 2019 at 6:00 am

By [Tyrone Beason](#)

*Seattle Times columnist*

A bill moving through the Legislature in Olympia brings some much-needed attention to an issue I've told you about before but that for too long has gone under the radar in our discussions about the environment: Communities of color and lower-income households face a greater threat from air, water and land-based pollution in the Seattle metro area and across the state.

That's especially true for the culturally and economically mixed communities of the South Puget Sound and for Hispanic communities in the farmlands of Eastern Washington.

But if the "HEAL Act" reaches Gov. Jay Inslee's desk — and all indications are that it will — the specific risks and needs facing these communities will get special consideration when state agency regulators and lawmakers form environmental policy.

For starters, the act, which has already passed the Senate as [Bill 5489](#), would define "environmental justice" in Washington state as "the fair treatment of all persons, regardless of race, color, national origin, ethnicity, language disability, income or other demographic or geographic characteristics with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

The bill, now in committee in the House, also calls for setting up a task force to decide how best to address environmental-health disparities, at least in part with the help of an [innovative online mapping tool I reported on recently](#) that lets users identify geographic areas that face greater health risks due to different kinds of pollution.

The tool also contains demographic data such as income, housing affordability, race, gender, age, English-language use and educational attainment. All of these factors can be important when assessing an area's relative vulnerability to diesel emissions from highways, toxic waste from industry, lead in the water and other sources of pollution.

The legislation comes at the same time that Inslee, who's running for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, seeks to raise the nation's sense of urgency about combating climate change.

It's an admirable cause. But Inslee has his work cut out for him in addressing his own state's efforts to address gaps in environmental-health risks between people who have the means to protect themselves from the effects of pollution and climate change, and those who are less likely to be able to do so.

The HEAL Act and the new pollution map will give him and lawmakers two powerful tools in this effort by officially making environmentalism a social-justice matter.

Kent, located in a culturally rich part of South King County that registers high among the communities most at risk from pollution in the Puget Sound Region, is on the front lines of the health-risk disparity issue.

That's one reason that the Rev. Herbert Carey, pastor of To God Be the Glory House of Worship in the West Valley Park in that city, has been working hard to educate his congregation and the surrounding area about the environmental threats they're up against — and get people talking about what to do about them.

There's plenty of fodder for conversation, especially with recent, attention-grabbing news stories like NPR's segment headlined, [“Whites Contribute More to Air Pollution: Minorities Bear the Burden.”](#)

Carey's happy that news outlets and politicians are talking about health-care disparities due to problems like air pollution and proximity to landfills and factories.

But “that doesn't necessarily trickle down to the community,” especially to people who are preoccupied with trying to make ends meet and who have to deal with other stresses like racial injustice and poor access to health-care facilities and child care, he said.

He wants to make people more aware of the possible links between socio-economic problems and environmental-health threats, such as school absenteeism due to pollution-related illness, missing work to care for a sick relative and crushing pollution-linked medical bills.