



JCRC of Greater Washington 2020 Environmental Policy

It is Time to Act—the Jewish Perspective and Imperative on the Environment and Climate Change

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC) has a long history of advocacy for policies that protect the environment and mitigate past practices that have harmed and degraded it. The policies set forth in this Environmental Policy Paper are adopted by the Board of the JCRC and supersede prior policy papers issued by JCRC.

A Link to Jewish Text

As a Jewish community organization, we are inspired by the teachings drawn from our sacred texts about the environment and our responsibility to protect it. For example:

- In Genesis 2:15, G-d commands us to “till and tend” the earth, commonly interpreted as instruction to watch over and protect our environment. G-d has given us Earth and it is our responsibility to take care of it for the short time each of us is here.
- “*L’dor v’dor* - from generation to generation” is a tenet Judaism holds dear. Things are passed down from parent to child: histories, values, beliefs, and the very Earth we inhabit. For this inheritance to be given to our children and their children, it must be preserved with the utmost care.
- The Talmud observes, “Of all that the Holy One Blessed be He created in His world, He created nothing in vain [superfluous].” Nothing in creation is useless or expendable, everything manifests some divine purpose. It follows, therefore, that there is a divine interest in maintaining the natural order of the universe. (Jonathan Helfand, “The Earth is the Lord’s: Judaism and Environmental Ethics,” in Religion and Environmental Crisis, Eugene Hargrove, ed., University of Georgia Press.)
- When G-d created the first person, G-D took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said 'See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. And everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy My world - for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.' (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, on Ecclesiastes 7:28.)
- We encourage the community to read the important teachings contained in the *teshuva* published by the Rabbinical Assembly of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism entitled “On the Mitzvah of Sustainability” by Rabbis Nina Beth Cardin and Avram Israel Reisner, which can be found at:

<https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/cjls%20sustainability%20teshuvah%20--final%20edit.pdf>

The Environment Needs Our Help

The policy resolutions set forth in the section following this are intended to deal with the need to protect our environment –public lands, water and air and, in particular, the critical, indeed, **existential** threats climate change poses to the Earth’s environment.

People have treated our Earth carelessly for far too long. The climate is changing in alarming and rapid ways and the causes stem from human behaviors, many of which are within our power to change. It may well be too late to prevent all of the adverse impacts of climate change. Now, we are faced with a fast-approaching deadline beyond which we can no longer mitigate the existing impacts of climate change and repair our mistakes. The Jewish community—in fact, all communities--must act unequivocally to protect nature and the environment from further harm and to ameliorate, to the extent possible, the effects of harms we can no longer prevent.

Promotion of sustainability practices, energy conservation, energy efficiency, clean energy and agricultural practices that reduce carbon consumption as means to tackle climate change are all issues that call for action with urgency. Scientific data regarding our environment should raise an alarm. CO₂ levels in the atmosphere have never been higher. Since 2015, the earth has experienced the five warmest years in recorded history. Sea levels are rising at double the rate of the previous century. Extreme and deadly weather events are increasing worldwide and are affecting our economy as well as our environment.

Solutions that are in line with scientific consensus on global warming and that respond with the needed urgency and thoroughness include: emissions reduction targets consistent with the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C, achieving significant progress by 2030; and a comprehensive response that moves all sectors of our economy toward net-zero emissions by 2050. But even these measures will not completely address the effects of climate change that we are already witnessing: rising sea levels, soil erosion, wildfires, inland flooding in some places and water shortages in others, tornadoes in areas they have rarely occurred and more violent and frequent storms and hurricanes. These existing threats require us to take steps to mitigate harm - greater flood control measures; hardening of infrastructure to prevent widespread loss of power, roadways, potable water, transportation, communication networks and housing and to enable prompt restoration of critical services.

It is imperative that policies to address the climate crisis include job programs, skills training, education, investment in a clean energy economy and just transition for both urban and rural areas, with a focus on the economically disenfranchised, people of color, indigenous communities, and women, who are disproportionately facing environmental degradation; reclamation and restoration of land and water adversely affected by fossil fuel production, extraction and processing; and the steadily-rising economic inequality and the opportunity for a clean energy economy to help counter these trends. And in parts of our nation plagued by depleted water reservoirs, we can support technologies like those developed and adopted in Israel to maximize the use of available supplies.

The DMV is experiencing the deleterious impacts of the climate crisis and increasing costs of rising water levels, flooding and destructive weather events. The shores of the Potomac River

regularly flood at the Lincoln Memorial and in the City of Alexandria. Tangier Island, the Tidewater region and Naval Station Norfolk are hot spots for sea level rise. More frequent and powerful storms have devastated Ellicott City and other areas in the region with escalating budgetary impacts to states, localities and homeowners.

The environmental consequences from food production and consumption include deforestation, chemical and animal waste, methane from farm animals, all the way to the packaging and transportation with which our food is delivered. These consequences affect air, land, and water resources directly and, in many cases, are major accelerants of carbon dioxide levels and thus, climate change. Waste management has similar consequences, with landfills producing significant additional methane emissions and litter, particularly single-use plastic items which pollute oceans and other ecosystems.

But our environmental concerns are not limited to the need to address the dangers of climate change. As stewards of our planet, we must protect natural habitats and public lands, ensure clean air and safe water supplies, preserve aquatic life in our oceans, rivers and lakes, protect our wildlife and endangered species and promote the safety of the planet's natural wonders.

Resolutions

The JCRC is committed to the pursuit of environmental justice and will take the following actions, among others:

- Advocate for the environment and to reverse climate change through the tools most at our disposal namely, legislative and regulatory actions. The JCRC will advocate for legislation that not only mitigates environmental degradation, but also helps our community adapt to the warmer future we all face. Judaism's principles of justice and fairness guide support for policies that include all communities and right the historic wrongs of environmental racism.
- Elevate Judaism's principles of justice and fairness that guide support for policies that protect all communities and that seek to right the historic wrongs of policies and practices that, intentionally or not, differentially affect or disadvantage communities based on race or color. Further, we support policies that assist low-income persons to afford reasonable energy costs, including innovative public-private partnerships.
- Support legislation and regulatory actions in Maryland, Virginia and D.C. to meet the greenhouse gas reduction goals scientists say is necessary. In doing so, we will take into account goals recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the international body that assesses the science related to climate change.
- Inform our community, both individuals and institutions, on matters that will promote sustainability practices and advocate for legislation and regulations that will enhance sustainability. Additionally, we will educate our community partners such as synagogues, community centers and individuals as to the environmental issues facing us and the ways in which they can contribute to climate mitigation and to reducing their energy usage and costs.

- Encourage legislation that aggressively moves Maryland, Virginia and D.C. away from fossil fuels and onto clean renewable energy.
- Back policies that reduce demand for electricity by promoting investment in energy efficiency and green buildings.
- Advocate for legislation that will protect the unique resources of Chesapeake Bay watershed
- Promote legislation and regulatory actions that hasten the transition to carbon neutral and electrified mass transportation and other vehicles.
- Promote and support legislation to protect public lands, clean air and water, encourage conservation of our natural resources, wildlife and protection of nature's wonders.

Sources

Daniel Swartz, “[Jews, Jewish Texts, and Nature: A Brief History.](#)”

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