



MANITOBA ECO-NETWORK

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Environmental Justice and Racism Team
Environment and Climate Change Canada
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Re: Manitoba Eco-Network Response to the Draft National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice (2026-2031)

Manitoba Eco-Network (MbEN) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback in response to the Government of Canada's *Draft National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice* (Draft Strategy). Over the past five years, MbEN has been working with community members in Manitoba to encourage governments at all levels (federal, provincial, and municipal) to enact meaningful legal and policy changes that will better protect disproportionately impacted populations from negative and health consequences and improve their access to environmental justice.

MbEN is a signatory to the letter jointly submitted by Breast Cancer Action Quebec, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, the Canadian Environmental Law Association, the David Suzuki Foundation, Ecojustice, Environmental Defence, and West Coast Environmental Law Association, among others. We strongly suggest the Environmental Justice and Racism Team adopt the recommendations for the development of the final Strategy included in the joint submission. The following comments from MbEN adds additional context from our past engagement with Manitobans and highlights the [feedback we provided in December 2025](#) that we did not see reflected in the Draft Strategy.

Overall, MbEN feels there have been positive steps taken in the development of the Draft Strategy, including this opportunity for public input. However, there is a need for further updates to add more details about the practical impact of the strategy and include clear commitments, resources, pathways to action, and measurable indicators of success. There is a lot more work to be done before the final Strategy is released in Fall 2026.

Scope of the Draft Strategy

The *National Strategy* should recognize that environmental justice means more than addressing environmental racism and requires tangible outcomes for citizens that improve their access to justice. There is a need for a broader understanding of the term "environmental justice" that goes beyond the experiences of communities that are disproportionately impacted by toxic substances and reflects new pathways to address environmental racism and protect the environment in all federal governance processes.

The Draft Strategy appears to contemplate a range of potential opportunities that could contribute to improved access to environmental justice and eradication of environmental racism from federal processes. However, the Draft Strategy contains few clear commitments to

practical regulatory reforms that will result in measurable change regarding environment justice and environmental racism. There is no indication of the specific outcomes to be achieved by the implementation of the Strategy, such as reductions in pollution and environmental hazards, measurable health improvements, or the number of regulatory changes made to ensure federal laws and policies reflect the principles of environmental justice.

MbEN recommends the Draft Strategy be updated to include clear outcomes and indicate the process that will be followed to achieve these goals. This should include the addition of binding government commitments, accountability measures, dedicated resources, implementation timelines, the establishment of measurable indicators of success, and public reporting commitments. Without measurable goals, it will be difficult for the Minister to show that the Strategy has successfully addressed environmental racism and environmental justice and facilitated transformative change.

Defining Environmental Justice

MbEN supports the recognition of the four principles of environmental justice included in the Draft Strategy: procedural, recognitional, distributive, and restorative justice. However, the definitions of these principles are narrowly construed and will serve to limit the application of the National Strategy. For example, by focusing on “past harms”, the definition of restorative justice in the Draft Strategy does not acknowledge the ongoing environmental racism and resulting environmental impacts that are still experienced by many communities in Canada today. The draft definition of restorative justice also fails to acknowledge the compensation that should be part of the federal government’s restorative justice efforts in communities impacted by environmental racism.

The definition of environmental justice should also reflect a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment and the broad range of potential environmental justice outcomes. When we asked Manitobans, they told us environmental justice means a recognized and meaningful role for the public in legal and policy processes. It means legal standing for citizens so they can better protect their legal rights and hold industry and government accountable for actions that threaten their health and surrounding environment, and it means stronger environmental enforcement mechanisms.

Manitobans identified a range of environmental justice outcomes they expected to see at the federal level, including:

- Amplification of the voices of those with lived experience and those who live in vulnerable environments.
- Polluters are made directly responsible for the impact or harms that they have caused.
- All Canadians live in a healthy environment regardless of race or economic status and to have meaningful input into decisions about their land and water.
- Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from Indigenous communities.
- Access to legal tools and supports to protect rights and interests.

MbEN recommends adopting a working definition that captures a broader understanding of environmental justice and its influence on government processes both as a lens through which to approach decision-making, and the need for outcomes and practical tools that reflect all elements of environmental justice.

Vision and Guiding Principles

MbEN prefers the “proposed vision” that was included in earlier consultation documents:

Proposed vision

The Government of Canada envisions a future where every individual enjoys a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment. We commit to advancing environmental justice across the country and eliminating racism and racial discrimination in all forms and manifestations.

The updated Vision in the Draft Strategy, “[t]o advance environmental justice supporting equal access to healthy, safe and more secure environments for communities”, appears to set a lower standard of commitment from the federal government and uses language that no longer aligns with the environmental rights and protections articulated under the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* (CEPA). This updated definition also no longer articulates any commitments in terms of environmental racism and racial discrimination, a change that will reduce the scope of the Strategy’s impact. MbEN suggests adjusting this wording to better reflect the overall goals of the Strategy, with specific reference to environmental racism.

The Draft Strategy also includes four guiding principles:

1. Protecting the environment in environmentally hazardous areas.
2. Acknowledging lived experiences and realities, and respecting differences.
3. Encouraging environmental education.
4. Building meaningful relationships and ensuring inclusive participation.

Overall, MbEN still finds the guiding principles weak and/or too narrowly focused. The principles and priorities should reflect the growing body of literature and legal standards associated with environmental justice and the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment both in Canada and at the international level. As noted in our comments from December 2025, this requires, among other things:

- When pursuing protection of the environment, the National Strategy should go beyond the protection of humans and include broader considerations of ecosystem health and the protection of natural entities and animals. The *National Strategy* should also encourage respect for nature and acknowledge the sacred role of the environment in many cultures and communities.
- The National Strategy should clarify who will be responsible for creating and delivering environmental educational opportunities, and how they will be resourced. There is a need to better articulate the intended outcomes and indicate the specific sources and types of educational information to be encouraged through the National Strategy.
- The addition of additional principles to support the interpretation and application of the National Strategy such as the principles of intergenerational equity and non-regression, and the precautionary principle.

Priority area one: Promoting environmental justice across federal government institutions

MbEN supports the goal of embedding the principles of environmental justice into federal regulatory processes and integrating environmental justice and intersectionality into decision-making. However, the National Strategy requires more detailed commitments to transformative

change. For example, there is a need for the National Strategy to articulate clear commitments to the public review and reform of federal laws to ensure federal alignment with the Strategy. This federal review process should, at a minimum, require the development of government implementation plans, be properly resourced, and include public reporting requirements.

In Manitoba, community members have emphasized a range of additional actions the government should take to advance environmental justice. For example, the community members we engaged with during our *Healthy Environment, Healthy Neighbourhood* project identified the following environmental justice priorities:

- Creating a recognized and meaningful role for the public in legal and policy processes.
- Legal standing for citizens so they can better protect their legal rights and hold industry and government accountable for actions that threaten their health and surrounding environment.
- Financial and legal support for community-based actions, including independent data collection.

The Manitobans we have engaged with about environmental justice have particularly emphasized the need for all levels of government to develop and strengthen legal tools to facilitate public access to environmental justice. For example, the community members we work with are excited about the recognition of environmental justice at the national level because most people associate environmental justice with increased access to legal remedies and practical outcomes. This includes access to stronger legal tools and legal standing to pursue litigation to punish those who have caused environmental harm. This is particularly important since current legal remedies are not adequate and difficult to use (or not available at all to the public). Potential legal opportunities to improve access to environmental justice at the federal level that could be addressed through implementation of the National Strategy includes:

- Reform of s. 17-22 of CEPA.
- Adoption of a federal Environmental Bill of Rights.
- Funding to allow vulnerable communities and grassroots groups access to legal representation and expert evidence.
- Stronger legal enforcement mechanisms.

As suggested in our December 2025 submission, MbEN also recommends the creation of an independent oversight agency, such as a federal Office of Environmental Justice, to assist with the implementation of the National Strategy. In Canada, there are a range of different institutions and government-appointed oversight positions used in environmental government processes including the Courts, the Ombudsperson, the Auditor General, or a specialized government officer (e.g., Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development).

Duties associated with these types of oversight function can include:

- Educating the public on their rights and applicable legal processes,
- Advising government on compliance with the legal framework,
- Auditing programs and tools associated with the legal framework,
- Mandatory reporting – e.g., annual report, special reports, etc., and
- Referring applications for investigations and other processes to the appropriate body/department.

MbEN recommends updating the Draft Strategy to create a role for an existing (e.g., the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development) or new oversight body to review the outcomes, reports, and future government actions associated with the *National Strategy*.

Priority area two: Strengthening collaboration and coordination on assessing, preventing and addressing environmental racism for a stronger Canada

There are some promising priority actions identified in the Draft Strategy, such as the development of a transparent and standardized methodology to address environmental burden and social vulnerability nationally, and the development of information sharing platforms to improve access to information for affected communities. However, there are limited details on the scope of these planned activities and no indication of who will be responsible for undertaking such actions or how they will be resourced. The Draft Strategy must be updated to include clear commitments and detailed descriptions of identified priority actions before the Final Strategy is published.

MbEN sees the National Strategy as an opportunity for the federal government to take a leadership role in the development of legal strategies to address environmental racism and improve access to environmental justice. Thus, MbEN also recommends the addition of more detailed commitments to facilitate intergovernmental coordination, identify existing regulatory barriers, and provide guidance on how the federal government will address situations where other levels of government are hindering public access to environmental justice.

Priority area three: enhancing impacted communities' participation in federal environmental policy and decision-making

As discussed in our December 2025 comments, the National Strategy should ensure that meaningful public participation and Indigenous consultation is maintained, improved and resourced in all federal environmental decision-making processes. The standard of “meaningful public participation” has received much consideration from Canadian environmental academics and has a developed set of recognized elements that should be incorporated into any engagement or outreach activities associated with the National Strategy. For example, see the research memo on [Meaningful Public Participation in IA](#) produced by MbEN and our partner organizations as part of a recent impact assessment reform project.

In order to ensure meaningful engagement in the development and implementation of the National Strategy, MbEN recommends:

- Publishing a public summary of engagement activities undertaken during Strategy development, including participating organizations, major themes raised, and how feedback informed the final Strategy;
- Creating an advisory committee on assessing and preventing environmental racism and advancing environmental justice; and
- Conducting ongoing engagement with impacted communities on the implementation of the Strategy.

Priority area four: Learning from experience and avoiding recurring challenges

MbEN recommends the Draft Strategy be updated to specifically commit to changes that will better enable the government to address past and ongoing instances of environmental racism and facilitate access to environmental justice for impacted communities. As discussed in more detail in the Joint Submission referenced at the beginning of this document, this requires, at a minimum:

- Recognition and support of Indigenous governance, stewardship, and environmental authority as foundational elements of environmental justice, and
- Commitments to address and compensate impacted communities for legacy and historical environmental injustices.

Conclusion

MbEN views the National Strategy as an important opportunity for the Government of Canada to create real transformative change, facilitate implementation of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, and ensure Canadians have better access to environmental justice, particularly those most vulnerable and disproportionately impacted by environmental harms.

This submission has highlighted the main concerns MbEN shared in December 2025 that we did not see reflected in the Draft Strategy. We strongly recommend the Government of Canada implement our recommended changes and the range of suggestions included in the joint submission referenced at the beginning of this document.

Manitoba Eco-Network appreciates your consideration of our comments and recommendations for the next steps in the development of the *National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice*. We welcome future opportunities to engage with the Government of Canada to ensure the highest level of environmental and health protection measures are enacted for the benefit of current and future generations.

Sincerely,

Heather Fast, J.D., LL.M., Policy Advocacy Director

About Manitoba Eco-Network:

Manitoba Eco-Network is a non-profit registered charity which seeks to strengthen Manitoba's environmental community with the goal of protecting our environment for the benefit of current and future generations. We serve as an umbrella for environmental non-governmental organizations across the province. Our mission is to promote good environmental governance, support and build capacity, advocate for environmental justice, and act as a bridge between environmental organizations, the public, and all levels of government.