EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler Remarks
National Environmental Justice Advisory Council
Public Teleconference
August 19, 2020

- I am pleased to join you today, albeit virtually. I hope all of you are well and staying safe.

- I was looking forward to meeting with the NEJAC ("knee-jack") leadership in person back in March, but the pandemic kept that from happening.

- The NEJAC plays a critical role advising the EPA on environmental justice.

- Many of you recall the agency went through a review of all our federal advisory committees last year and reaffirmed the importance of the NEJAC.

- In fact, just this week I signed the NEJAC's charter renewal.

- Thank you for your service on the Council. I'd also like to recognize Richard Moore for serving a NEJAC's chair. Thank you so much, Richard.

- We continue to need your help to advance environmental justice and make measurable progress improving the health and welfare of overburdened communities.

- As you may know, I began my career at EPA's office of pollution prevention, so I have a long-standing passion for preventing pollution and helping rebuild communities.

- I grew up in the Midwest Rust Belt and have seen first-hand how communities that lose their economic base have a limited ability to address environmental challenges.

- This is why I have made it a priority to make measurable progress improving our environment.

- This includes cleaning up Superfund sites at a record pace, returning many to productive use. This reduces exposure to hazards and creates economic activity that can rebuild and sustain communities.

- Over the last three years, EPA has fully or partially delisted 57 sites from the National Priorities List and last year we deleted all or part of 27 Superfund sites– the largest number of deletions in a single year since Fiscal Year 2001.

- In fiscal year 2020, EPA announced the selection of 155 grants for communities and tribes totaling over $65 million in brownfields funding through the agency's Assessment, Revolving Loan Fund, and Cleanup.

- Of the communities selected this year, 118 can potentially clean up brownfield sites within communities that have Opportunity Zones.

- We have taken aggressive action on lead exposure. Two years ago, the federal government released an action plan to ensure that our nation's children – especially those in vulnerable communities – will be protected from lead exposure.

- Since then, EPA has finalized stronger dust-lead hazard standards and increased enforcement and compliance efforts.

- We also proposed the first major update to the lead and copper rule in over two decades.

- It requires systems to act sooner to reduce lead, require testing in schools and childcare facilities, and mandate communication and transparency with the public.

- And we awarded $69.7 million dollars in the last two years to states, territories, and tribes for lead testing in schools and childcare facilities located in low-income and disadvantaged communities.

- In President Trump's 2020 budget, EPA is proposing a $50 million dollars Healthy Schools Grant Program to expand protections on children where they learn and play.

- EPA has prioritized critical investments in water infrastructure.

- Through our WIFIA and revolving loan programs, EPA has spent $38 billion dollars on water infrastructure in the United States since the start of this administration and we will spend more in the future.

- EPA is also improving air quality in urban areas. Over the past three years, we have approved over 1200 SIPs, both new and backlogged and re-designated 49 non-attainment areas.

- By 2022, working with state partners, we are on track to re-designate at least 65 of the 166 areas that were designated nonattainment by October 2022.

- And in the past three years, under President Trump, air pollution has fallen 7 percent.

- We have vastly increased our enforcement efforts, holding polluters accountable at a record rate.

- In 2019, EPA reported increases in every criminal enforcement measure with 170 new cases opened, 141 defendants charged, 123 defendants convicted, $48 million in fines and $60 million in restitution.

- From 2017 to 2019, there has been a 79 percent increase in self-disclosed violations by facilities, leading to greater compliance by these firms.

- And we continued to aggressively pursue civil and criminal cases during the pandemic.

- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, EPA launched a new grant program to address the needs of communities disproportionately affected by the crisis.

- We are on track to award $1 million dollars in funding to state, local and tribal governments disproportionately affected by the pandemic by October.
- Within EPA, we have taken steps to strengthen environmental justice.

- In 2018, the Office of Environmental Justice was elevated into my immediate office to ensure your equities are considered at the highest levels of management and in development of policy.

- Also, in 2018, President Trump signed America's Water Infrastructure Act, the first bill ever to codify OEJ, solidifying its existence in the organization.

- This was the first time a bill mandates staff resources solely dedicated to serve as liaisons to minority, tribal and low-income communities in EPA's regional offices nationwide.
- To ensure our EJ and community-revitalization efforts work cohesively, we launched the Environmental Justice and Community Revitalization Council (EJCRC), a senior-level body to support coordination across the agency.

- Last year, with our regional realignment effort, we elevated EJ staff in each of our 10 regional offices to the RA's office to better serve minority, tribal and low-income communities.

- While these may be internal facing, and would seem to go unnoticed, they are important in helping the agency address environmental justice challenges.

- This administration has made some tremendous progress, and overall EPA has done a remarkable job in cleaning up our air, water and lands over the past 50 years.

- However, there is no disputing the fact that many challenges remain for many vulnerable communities.

- We cannot regulate our way out of these issues. For doing so could threaten the economic base for which your communities need to survive.

- Instead we need to find new opportunities to collaborate and make progress together.
- Consequently, one of my top priorities moving forward is developing and implementing a community-based approach to environmental protection.

- This will require a major shift in the way we do business. One of the biggest challenges facing the EPA has been to tear down the silos to address the suite of environmental threats facing communities. We are still developing the framework.

- I welcome your thoughts on ways EPA can better address community environmental needs in a more holistic manner.

- We must think creatively on how to make measurable and enduring improvements in overburdened communities, because if we don't, we will continue to fail those in the greatest need.

- And I believe EPA as an agency, with a new focus, can both protect the places we love and bring back the places that have been hurt by pollution.

- **If we focus our attention properly,** we can help these places become the healthy communities they have been striving so long to be.

- Thanks again for your service.

- I'm looking forward to a read-out from staff on the discussion you have today and tomorrow, in particular the NEJAC Superfund task force work.

- I have a few minutes for questions.