



Environmental Justice Clinic **YEAR IN REVIEW**

January 2024 - June 2025



Environmental
Justice Clinic

VERMONT LAW & GRADUATE SCHOOL

Student clinicians in the Environmental Justice Clinic (EJC) at Vermont Law and Graduate School work in partnership with community organizations, tribal nations, coalitions, and other stakeholders to support multi-strategy campaigns that address environmental racism to advance community health and human rights.

The EJC is one of the only law school clinics in the U.S. specifically devoted to environmental justice—an interdisciplinary practice at the intersection of civil rights and the environment. Students gain experience working on law and policy issues at the nexus of environment, race, and policy, while also learning essential community lawyering skills.

This report shares highlights from January 2024 through June 2025 featuring EJC faculty, staff, and students.

CLIENTS AND PROJECTS

Local Environmental Action Demanded (L.E.A.D.)

One of the first Superfund sites, the remnants of the Tar Creek mining operation extend 40 square miles across Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri. Toxic lead and zinc waste affects subsistence fishing, underground water, and human health. The EJC submitted a **public comment** on behalf of L.E.A.D. regarding the EPA's proposed rule concerning updated Residential Soil Level Lead Guidance and offered input on the 2025 Tar Creek Strategic Plan.



Black Belt Citizens and Black Belt Women Rising

A 974-acre landfill (which accepts waste, including toxic coal ash, from 33 states), a catfish feed mill, and a cheese processing plant pose threats to the health of Uniontown, Alabama, located in the Black Belt Region. Its sewer system is outdated and efforts to remedy its drinking water have lacked transparency and community involvement. The EJC previously **represented Ben Eaton** of Black Belt Citizens in litigation against the U.S. Department of Agriculture for failure to disclose under the Freedom of Information Act.

The EJC currently collaborates with Black Belt Citizens and Black Belt Women Rising on landfill regulations.

Bishop Paiute Tribe

In October 2024, the EJC filed comments on the Rhyolite Ridge Lithium-Boron Project Final Environmental Impact Statement on behalf of the Bishop Paiute Tribe. The Bishop Paiute Tribe is a federally recognized Tribe and one of the largest in the state of California. The Tribe's ancestral territories extend throughout California and Nevada, including the site of the proposed Rhyolite Ridge Lithium-Boron Project.

The Tribe's comments focused on the potential impacts to environmental, biological, and cultural resources, water resources, the local economy, housing, and the lack of adequate government-to-government tribal consultation.

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Atencio v. State of New Mexico

In December 2024, the EJC filed an **amicus brief** on behalf of a coalition of 27 environmental law and constitutional law professors and experts asking a New Mexico appellate court to uphold its state constitutional right of protection for air, water, environment, and other natural



resources, and the fundamental rights of its people. There are 70,000 oil and gas production sites in New Mexico, contributing to some of the worst air quality in the country and harming the health and wellbeing of the state's communities.

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Held v. State of Montana

The EJC filed an amicus brief in *Held v. State of Montana* in the Montana Supreme Court on behalf of five federally recognized tribes and two Indigenous education scholars. The case was brought by 16 youth plaintiffs, represented by Our Children's Trust, who said their rights under the Montana Constitution, including the right to a "clean and healthful environment," were being violated by the state's promotion and use of fossil fuels.

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El Puente v. Army Corps of Engineers

Following a brief filed in 2023, the EJC urged the D.C. Circuit to reverse the District Court's decision to reject challenges to a dredging project in Puerto Rico's San Juan Bay to increase liquified natural gas (LNG) imports, damaging marine ecosystems, overburdening low income residents, and impeding local efforts to build community/energy resilience.

EJC IN THE COMMUNITY



Public Interest Environmental Law Conference

In February 2025, 14 Vermont Law and Graduate School students, along with four faculty and staff members, attended the 43rd Public Interest Environmental Law Conference hosted by the University of Oregon School of Law. EJC faculty and students also attended the conference in 2024. ▲

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Vermont State House

The EJC took a field trip to the Vermont State House in Montpelier to observe the legislative session and to meet with Vermont State Senator Kesha Ram Hinsdale. ▼



FACULTY HIGHLIGHTS

Visiting Professor Todd Howland

The EJC is pleased to welcome Todd Howland as a visiting professor. With more than 25 years of professional experience in the field of human rights, he most recently served as chief of the Development and Economic and Social Rights Branch of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva, Switzerland. He has also served as an OHCHR representative in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola, among other UN posts.

Howland recently accompanied a group of students on a trip to Miami, Oklahoma, to visit EJC client Local Environmental Action Demanded (L.E.A.D.). The students gained a broader understanding of the realities of environmental justice in the U.S. and how their skills can be put to use in support of communities struggling against injustice.

“Working with community activists demonstrated to the students, who are used to working in



semester-long periods of time, that it takes decades of advocacy and organizing to bring change,” he said. “The highlight was seeing the students’ understanding and advocacy grow by living and working directly with community activists.”



Director

Mia Montoya Hammersley

EJC director and assistant professor of law Mia Montoya Hammersley has represented conservation organizations in protecting land from extractive industries, Tribes in defending and asserting their land and water rights, and communities experiencing disproportionate environmental health harms.

Recent press and publication highlights include:

- Her article “In Defense of Land and Water Protectors: Environmental Justice and the Criminalization of Environmental Activism” was published in **Volume 54, Book 4** of *The University of Memphis Law Review*.
- Montoya Hammersley co-authored “**AI Is Mining More Than Data**” with student Hadley Chance JD/MCEP’25, which was published as part of the *Vermont Journal of Environmental Law*’s **2025 Top Ten Environmental Watch List**.
- She moderated the “Indigenous Rights and Climate Justice” panel at the *Vermont Journal of Environmental Law* **Climate Justice LIVE** symposium.



- Montoya Hammersley was interviewed by *The Huffington Post* about the use of water in AI: “**ChatGPT Is Under Attack For Its Use Of Water — But How Does That Even Work?**”



The EJC team attended the June 2024 EPA Regional Roadshow in Burlington, Vermont.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Centering Justice in Practice: One Environmental Law Student's Path

Savannah Collins JD/MCEP'25 decided to attend Vermont Law and Graduate School because she was looking for more than an environmental law school. She was searching for a school with a rigorous environmental justice program. The EJC fit her criteria perfectly.

"We don't just learn through theory," she said. "We have the opportunity to gain professional field experience. I'm looking forward to being able to flex my muscles on different topics and help the incoming students learn more about being attorneys."

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*Click to read more about
Savannah's journey.*



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE STATE BY STATE

Environmental Justice State by State is a law library and database of environmental justice laws, policies, mapping tools, and state-recognized definitions associated with environmental justice across the fifty states and territories. The database is intended to be an accessible tool for community advocates, attorneys, academics, and policymakers at all levels to use in the adoption and advancement of environmental justice law and policy.

This project is a collaboration between the EJC at Vermont Law and Graduate School, American

University, Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School, UC College of the Law, San Francisco, and the University of Texas School of Law Environmental Clinic. Additional support was provided by Conservation Law Foundation, Lone Star Legal Aid, and Taproot Earth. The project is funded by GRACE Communications Foundation and Cancer Free Economy Network.

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