

Recommendation 377
Funding for Savannah River Ecology Laboratory

Background

Recently, Environmental Justice has become a core element of the federal government Executive Branch's mission, and numerous Executive Orders have been enacted providing guiding principles on how federal agencies should allocate time, energy and funding to support issues of Environmental Justice in the U.S. These mandates are often tied to issues of human and environmental health (*EO 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-income Populations, Section 1-1, Implementation*), climate change (*EO 14008, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, Section 219, Securing Environmental Justice and Spurring Economic Opportunity*), and clean energy (*EO 14057, Catalyzing Clean Energy Industries and Jobs Through Federal Sustainability, Section 402, Incorporating Environmental Justice*).

These emerging priorities in the Executive Branch have led to increased prioritization of Environmental Justice through increased federal grant funding (e.g., *Justice 40 Initiative*) and increased emphasis on Environmental Justice in agency strategic plans (e.g., *US EPA 2022-2026 Strategic Plan*). Specifically, regarding the Savannah River Site, the newest revisions to *DOE Order 436.1A*, under the section on *Departmental Sustainability*, specify the need to increase agency-wide budgetary spending for Environmental Justice measures. For DOE field sites such as SRS, such spending must be accompanied by budgetary authority to repurpose mission-specific funds or by allocation of new resources to fulfill the mandate.

The proposed NERP Scholars Program, which would be conducted by SREL, focuses exclusively on providing educational opportunities to students from disadvantaged communities that are proximate to and that have been directly affected by DOE's activities on the Savannah River Site. This program would involve significant outreach efforts within the local communities surrounding SRS to socialize high school students with summer hands-on learning opportunities at SREL that they can participate in as undergraduates in college, leading to opportunities to join the SRS workforce after graduation or to pursue graduate education for more specialized training in topics that are pertinent to the DOE mission on SRS. The program would have a 10-week experiential learning program for undergraduates each summer, including a generous stipend and housing, along with a significant research experience and a variety of targeted educational workshops. For a subset of these students who demonstrate an interest and aptitude for continuing into graduate education, opportunities to get an MS degree from UGA would be provided and would be tailored around a research topic that is conducted on SRS in an area that contributes to the student's preparedness to later enter the SRS workforce, if desired. As designed, this program would involve a collaboration between DOE EM and DOE NNSA for funding and would involve staff from both DOE organizations in outreach activities, workshops for undergraduates and presentations to undergraduates at local and regional universities with significant student enrollments from disadvantaged communities.

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The Citizens Advisory Board views the benefits of such a program to be of significant value to DOE, to the local communities that surround SRS, and to SREL. As a result, the SRS CAB recommends that DOE-SR:

- Provide the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory with sufficient additional base funding to conduct the NERP Scholars Program and allow it to help local communities and DOE address inequities stemming from Environmental Justice issues by:
 - Conducting an annual 10-week undergraduate learning program on SRS specifically for students from local communities and minority serving institutions, including formal training and experiences toward employment and career opportunities, as well as the possibility of graduate education in areas related to the needs of DOE EM and DOE NNSA on SRS.
 - Funding for hiring new personnel to support recruitment, logistics and mentoring activities associated with the operation of the NERP Scholars Program, and
 - Investing in instructional and research equipment and infrastructure that enhances its ability to deliver state of the art experiential learning and research opportunities to students from disadvantaged communities around SRS.

References

1. Executive Order (EO) 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-income Populations, Section 1-1, Implementation
2. US EPA 2022-2026 Strategic Plan
3. DOE Order 436.1A
4. SRS CAB recommendations: 362 and 368