

Climate group that called for Gaza ceasefire risks losing federal funding

An alliance of grassroots environmental groups could lose \$60 million in federal funding after calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The Climate Justice Alliance (CJA) was named one of the Environmental Protection Agency's "grantmakers" more than a year ago, putting it in charge of distributing subgrants for locally led environmental projects. But out of 11 of the EPA's grantmakers, the CJA is the only one that has yet to receive any funding. The group has faced a barrage of attacks for publicly opposing the Israel-Hamas war, and some EPA staffers say the group has been singled out as a result.

"We have been deeply disappointed to witness EPA's current withholding of \$60 million to the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA), the only one of the eleven grantees that courageously spoke out against the environmental toll and human rights violations in Palestine," a group of anonymous EPA and Department of Energy employees wrote in an open letter in December.

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The money could disappear if it isn't dispersed before President-elect Donald Trump steps into office. Trump has said he would rescind unspent funds from the Inflation Reduction Act that set aside money for the grants. And if his second term is anything like his first, he's likely to gut the EPA

and roll back environmental protections.

With a deregulatory agenda at the national level, local efforts become even more crucial to safeguarding Americans' air, water, and climate. It's those kinds of grassroots initiatives that the EPA's grantmakers are supposed to support and what's at risk if the agency doesn't disburse the funds before it's too late.

"What this would do is further strip away funds that our communities have been counting on," says CJA executive director KD Chavez. "We need people to be resourced so that at least on a local level they can do clean up projects, they can have air quality monitoring," Chavez says, citing examples of how the money might be used.

Money for the EPA's Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking Program came from the Inflation Reduction Act, which included \$369 billion for clean energy and climate action. The 11 grantmakers include universities and nonprofit organizations charged with doling out a total of \$600 million to locally led environmental projects.

That was supposed to make it easier for smaller grassroots groups to access funding, especially those living with the most pollution, which are often communities of color in the United States. The CJA includes around 100 organizations across the US, many of them rooted in communities of color like the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program and the Indigenous Environmental Network.

The CJA, in particular, was chosen to distribute subgrants to EPA regions 8–10, which encompass most of the Western US. It's also the national grantmaker responsible for outreach to tribal communities. The CJA says it has already spent \$1.6 million from its own operational budget to get the organizational infrastructure in place needed to allow community groups to apply for subgrants. It's supposed to

receive \$50 million for those subgrants, plus an additional \$10 million for technical capacity.

“Why have we been singled out as anti-American?”

As of January 3rd, only \$461 million of the funding from the grantmaking program had been awarded, according to data on the EPA website, leaving the rest of the funds vulnerable to the incoming Trump administration.

“There are questions we have about the singling out of us as an organization. Why have we been singled out as anti-American? Is it because we’re led by working class people, Black Indigenous, and people of color communities?” Chavez says.

Over the past year, conservative media and some Republican lawmakers have accused the CJA of being “radicals,” antisemitic, and “Anti-American” for its stance on the Israel-Hamas war. Even before the EPA announced its selection of 11 grantmakers, the CJA had released a statement in October 2023 calling on President Joe Biden and Congress to demand a ceasefire by Israel and Hamas.

“I was surprised to learn that \$50 million has been designated for Climate Justice Alliance, a group which explicitly publishes a ‘free Palestine’ section on its website. On the website, there are dozens of antisemitic and alarming images,” Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC) said to former EPA administrator Michael Regan when he testified before the House Oversight and Accountability Committee in July of last year. (Regan stepped down from his post in December.)

The CJA has published its ceasefire statement on its website. “We call on Biden and the US Congress to support an immediate end to the violence by publicly demanding a ceasefire within the region. We stand firmly on the side of peace and support the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination, decolonization and life,” the statement says.

“At our core CJA has always been anti war and pro communities,” Chavez says. “We are just collateral damage in a war against regulations,” they add.

The group has also caught flak for its environmental advocacy. A letter from Reps. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) and Buddy Carter (R-GA) to Regan last May accuses the CJA of supporting “partisan, and in some cases extreme, environmental activism” including “mass organization of climate alarmism protests” and the “litigation of fossil fuel projects.” The letter similarly castigates other grantmakers chosen by the EPA, but the CJA has faced more heat as protests in the US against the war in Gaza gained momentum.

The letter published by EPA and DOE staffers last month (first reported on by *The Intercept*) urges the agencies to “end their collaboration with Israel until there is a permanent ceasefire” and “release all designated federal funds to Climate Justice Alliance.” It says the funding is needed for Indigenous communities and other groups that have historically been “left out” of environmental protections.

According to Chavez, the EPA told the CJA in a meeting in September that it was under investigation by the agency’s office of general counsel (OGC) without any explanation as to why. The group says the agency’s Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights then told the group to expect funding by January 6th – even though grantmakers were initially anticipated to be able to start doling out subgrants in the summer of 2024.

The EPA didn’t verify the CJA’s claims or answer specific questions from *The Verge* about an investigation into the CJA. “EPA continues to review the grant for the Climate Justice Alliance,” EPA spokesperson Nick Conger said in an email to *The Verge*. “EPA continues to work through its rigorous process to obligate the funds under the Inflation Reduction Act, including the Thriving Communities Grantmakers program.” The

agency is “on track” to award more than 90 percent of the funding by the end of the Biden administration, Conger added.

When *The Verge* asked the EPA last year how it chose grantmakers for the program, Regan said in a call with reporters that they each “demonstrated a very strong governance structure that creates accountability” and that the agency selected the 11 “knowing that they would be able to operationalize these resources in a way that the communities that need these resources the most would absolutely get them.”

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