July 6, 2021

The Honorable Michael S. Regan
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Mr. Regan:

On behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA), I thank you for meeting on May 20 with the leaders of major U.S. health organizations. APA’s Deputy CEO, Dr. Jim Diaz-Granados, informs me that it was a fruitful and informative meeting. We appreciate your listening to the ideas and priorities of the health community and working with us to advance our shared goals of protecting human health and the environment.

In this letter, I offer additional information and suggestions in support of the mission of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). APA is the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, with more than 122,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students as its members and affiliates. Our association is committed to mobilizing the knowledge and skills of psychologists to respond to environmental challenges and to improve the health and well-being of all people.

As psychologists, we are especially concerned about the multiple harmful impacts of climate change and pollution on mental health and brain function. For example, people's experiences of extreme weather events arising from climate change, such as drought, flooding, and severe storms, are linked to higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Periods of extreme heat are often characterized by higher rates of suicide, interpersonal violence, and intergroup conflict. Exposure to air pollution of various types is associated with impaired cognitive function, increased risks of Alzheimer’s disease and schizophrenia, and increased admissions to mental health emergency services. As is well known, lead exposure during childhood can have adverse effects on cognitive development and mental health. Recent evidence also suggests that PFAS exposure affects brain mechanisms and development.

Many of these impacts are greatest among groups that also face other challenges, including communities of color and communities that are economically disadvantaged – which raises serious concerns about health equity and environmental justice.

APA has led psychologists’ work on both the mitigation of and adaptation to environmental challenges. Our association issued a major report on Psychology and Global Climate Change in 2011. It has also produced two reports with ecoAmerica on the mental health impacts of climate change, the first of which served as an important source for the 2016 U.S. Climate and Health Assessment. Further, APA is an official observer organization at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and was one of the primary organizers of the 2019 International Summit on Psychology and Global Health: A Leader in Climate Action.
We appreciate EPA’s long-standing applications of psychological science in its work in risk analysis and decision-making. We offer APA’s support in further applying psychology to the assessment of the behavioral, social, and cultural dimensions of environmental challenges; to the design and implementation of regulations, programs, and technologies; and to communicating effectively with the public about environmental issues, including countering misinformation. We stand ready to provide scientific and policy information and to recommend expert consultants.

EPA recognized the role of psychology in addressing environmental challenges in a 2016 research funding opportunity on Anticipating the Environmental Impacts and Behavioral Drivers of Deep Decarbonization (EPA-G2017-STAR). Unfortunately, this funding opportunity was withdrawn by the Trump administration. We urge EPA to update and reissue the funding opportunity, with explicit attention to issues of population diversity and environmental justice. Research in this area is critical for guiding the transition to new forms of energy, preventing further damage to the environment, and enhancing the health and well-being of all communities.

Again, we at APA thank you and your EPA colleagues for your commitment to a healthy environment for all people, and we offer our expertise and assistance in support of your efforts. If you would like further information, please contact me or Dr. Howard Kurtzman, APA’s Senior Science Advisor, at hkurtzman@apa.org or 202-491-4567.

Sincerely,

Arthur C. Evans, Jr., Ph.D.
Chief Executive Officer

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