EPA Cancels Billions in Grants. Recipients Won’t Back Down.

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Ariana Brocious: I’m Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I’m Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

Ariana Brocious: Just a few years ago, the US passed the biggest climate law in its history, though you might not know it because it was called the Inflation Reduction Act.

Kousha Navidar: You might remember the headlines about EV tax credits and investment incentives for big projects, but the law also set aside billions of dollars in grants to support communities that have been hit hard by pollution and who the government has historically ignored.

Ariana Brocious: We're talking about money for projects like transforming houses of worship in Detroit into community resilience hubs.

Kousha Navidar: Places where residents can go to be safe during floods or heat waves.

Ariana Brocious: Right, and there were also projects to upgrade wastewater treatment systems in rural Alabama and improve air quality in Houston.

Kousha Navidar: But back in May, the Environmental Protection Agency announced that they were terminating many of these programs and grants because they no longer aligned with the EPAs priorities. They're going to withhold the funding.

Ariana Brocious: This is money that back in 2022, Congress approved, and the Trump administration decided unilaterally to cancel, but that's not surprising. This is the same EPA that just finalized the overturn of the endangerment finding, which determined that greenhouse gases are harmful to human health and the environment, and gave the agency the authority to create rules to limit pollution from cars and power plants.

Kousha Navidar: To be clear, and I really wanna underline this for listeners because sometimes the jargon can be a bit much. Trump's EPA is giving up its own legal authority to address climate change. By getting rid of the scientific consensus in the endangerment finding. They're getting rid of the basis they use to combat emissions now and in the future,

Ariana Brocious: They're just throwing out the science.

Kousha Navidar: right. Environmental lawyers have already promised to challenge this decision, but that process could take years, and while that happens, the harms only grow.

Ariana Brocious: And as shocking as that may be to the majority of Americans who want their government to do something about climate change, it's directly in line with the other actions the Trump administration took last year.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, and that aggressive anti-climate agenda brings us back to what we're talking about today, the cancellation and the defunding of grants to support communities that need resources to become healthier, to become more climate resilient.

Ariana Brocious: Places like the Native village of Kipnuk Alaska, which was awarded a $20 million community Change grant to build a retaining wall to protect against floods, but last May, before they could build the wall, the Trump administration terminated their award along with all of the EPAs Environmental and Climate Justice grant program.

Kousha Navidar: Five months later, a typhoon devastated the area and caused catastrophic flooding destroying much of the village.

Ariana Brocious: But this isn't the end of the story. A number of the groups that were awarded federal funding have banded together to sue for the money they're owed, including the village of Kipnuk.

Kousha Navidar: And others are seeking alternate funding streams. Today we'll hear from some of those whose federal funding was terminated, but who say their work serving their communities is far from over.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: My name's Ilyssa Manspeizer and I'm in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I am the CEO at Land Force and at Land Force we combine workforce readiness and environmental stewardship. And what that means is we train and hire people who are typically excluded from family sustaining jobs , And we provide them training in, Soft skills. So how to succeed at work, but also in the hard skills that are involved in environmental stewardship. They walk through our doors and we say, there are no barriers If you tell us you can do the work,and you show up, then we will be able to hire you.

Ariana Brocious: Across the region, Landforce's work focuses on habitat restoration, tree planting and care, vacant lot improvements, green infrastructure, and a range of other projects that strengthen communities and the environment.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: A lot of the people who walk through our doors are caught in a cycle of

generational poverty. , We know that the zip code that you come from in the United States often predetermines the professional success you have in life. So we are working with people who. Have not had the opportunity to really thrive, either because of the limited schooling that they had or because they are in the schooled to prison pipeline, and they're coming to us after they have been released from incarceration or they are coming to us because they have substance use disorders or they're coming to us because of trauma in their life that may have led to mental health diagnoses.

Ariana Brocious: Once they're trained, they join crews out in the field, where they gain more on the job experience. After some time, having become capable and skilled workers, Landforce supports them in finding employment elsewhere.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: I love the work we do. I love the people who come through our doors, because there is so much impact. When you can see somebody walk through our doors who is so dejected, and feeling so removed from any hope of a positive future, And you see as they do the work on themselves and as they do the work in the communities that we're engaging in, they begin to feel proud of themselves.They feel hopeful for the first time, often in a very long time. they just reengage in a way that is so, moving to watch and so powerful to play a small role in.

Ariana Brocious: In February 2024, Landforce submitted an application for a Community Change grant through the EPA.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: That Community Change grant was a partnership between Landforce, an organization in Philadelphia called Power Core, and six other partners.

Ariana Brocious: The grant would support urban wood production in both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, along with workforce development training. Instead of sending fallen or removed trees to a landfill, Landforce and its partners would collect the wood and turn it into usable lumber which they'd sell to support the mission of the organizations. The wood that couldn't be milled would be transformed into biochar - a soil amendment that helps remove contaminants like lead and improves the soil’s ability to filter and hold water.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: So in July, 2024, I received a message that we had actually been awarded this grant. I was completely and utterly overwhelmed.

Ariana Brocious: Landforce, along with their seven partner organizations, were awarded a total of $15.3 million dollars.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: I knew what good work this would let us do on the environmental level, as far as keeping reusable material out of the landfill. wise reuse, as well as the training, aspects within the mill there are a lot of skills that you learn that are transferable, that will lead to, higher waged jobs, And of course, the soil remediation.

Ariana Brocious: As soon as the contract was signed, Manspeizer (Man Spies-Zer) and her colleagues at Landforce got to work.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: We were in the process of setting up mills by the end of December, we had already released all of the equipment proposals that we would need to set up our mill. we had identified a warehouse where we were gonna set up the mill, and we signed a lease with them to start on February 1st. and we were raring to go.

Ariana Brocious: But just a month later, In January 2025, the newly inaugurated President Trump issued a series of executive orders directing federal agencies to close environmental justice offices and cease environmental-justice-related programs, including those administered by the EPA.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: Almost immediately it was clear that this grant was being targeted by the new administration. and those executive orders came out on a Monday night. By Tuesday morning. We sat down, and we had a conversation about where we were and what we would be able to do. We realized we had responses to all of the requests for proposals that we had submitted, , that we had winning bids for each of them, we had, all of the information we needed. To purchase the rest of the supplies and the equipments, and we set about doing so,

Ariana Brocious: Landforce started to draw down the money from the EPA, but it was start and stop.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: when you're purchasing $800,000 in equipment as a small nonprofit, you don't necessarily have that sitting in your bank account. Over the course of the five months from January until May 1st, we would occasionally have access to the funding. But on May 1st, we received a notification from the EPA that our award was being terminated.

Ariana Brocious: With the access to the funding that they had in that 5 month period, Landforce was able to buy all of the equipment for the mill. But the career training and development services they planned to provide had to be seriously limited. **Ilyssa Manspeizer:** We were able to get our mill set up and we had an opening in October. we're accepting wood,we are milling the logs. and we will soon be producing the biochar. Having said that.We had to cut our training from two separate recruitment periods and two separate trainings to one. And we had to reduce the number of potential trainees from 40 down to 18. It's hard to talk about people who have not come through our program because there was an entire recruitment we didn't do what I can tell you is the stories of people who have told us how pivotal, the relationship with Land Force has been for their professional development and that they firmly believe that without us, they would be in a very different part in their life. So the, the impacts of the loss of funding go very deeply.

Ariana Brocious: In its termination letter, the EPA said the Landforce grant was "no longer consistent with EPA funding priorities."

Ilyssa Manspeizer: I wish I understood why the project was terminated. Why this entire grant? Why the community change grants were all terminated. Because the things that, organizations like mine, like Land Force are doing in theory, uh, appeal to members of both parties because we are creating jobs in a job market that's not, not great. We are ensuring that we are using material wisely and producing things for resale. We're teaching small business skills. We are contributing to the economy, both through the workers that we help create, as well as through the products that we create. this is, this is stuff that we hear across both aisles is important So I honestly do not understand why this would be terminated by either party. If we agree to the terms of the termination and we close out the grant, they say they'll pay us but our partners and our participants, our communities deserve, to have the access to the full grant amount. , So we remain committed to, securing the grant in the way that it was originally, designed.

Ariana Brocious: Landforce is part of a coalition of organizations, tribes, and local governments suing the Trump Administration for terminating EPA Grant Programs.

Ilyssa Manspeizer: without this funding, it is really hard to be able to provide the kind of services that we so desperately need in our world right now. We are engaging in this lawsuit because there is harm being done and there comes a point when even if the harm isn't against me as an individual, It is against the people that we serve, either through the workforce development work we're doing, or through the environmental work we're doing, and there are thousands of people potentially who could benefit from the projects that we're working on. And the harm that comes to them is what drives me.

Music: In

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, we hear from one of the lawyers representing EPA grantees.

Ben Grillot: On a single day in February, 2025, a decision was made to eliminate an entire congressionally mandated program, and that's just not how government should work.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

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Music: Out

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: And I'm Kousha Navidar. When Congress passed the Inflation Reduction Act in 2022, it set aside $3 billion specifically to support local environmental and climate justice initiatives. To do that, the EPA built a series of sub-grant programs designed with the intention of making it easier for those who were eligible to apply for and access the resources.

Ariana Brocious: The response was overwhelming. One of the largest programs, the Community Change Grants, received more than 2,500 applications. After an extensive review process, just 105 were selected.

Kousha Navidar: It was a competitive, carefully-vetted effort to direct federal climate dollars to the communities Congress said should receive them, and then let those communities decide how best to use the funds.

Ariana Brocious: But the EPA has since terminated those grants. Now a group of affected grantees are suing the federal government to restore that funding.

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Ariana Brocious: to find out where the lawsuit stands.I spoke with Ben Grillot, Senior Attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center, one of the lawyers representing the group, He says grants were awarded to groups all across the country.

Ben Grillot: from, um, rural, um, native American villages in Alaska, um, to communities in North Carolina and Mississippi and Michigan, and everywhere in between. So the goal was to find places where communities are dealing with the impacts of environmental and climate justice and finding ways to prepare them for the changing world.

Ariana Brocious: Mm-hmm. Could you give us examples of some specific grants just to show the diversity, um, and kind of the range of things that these, these grants were addressing?

Ben Grillot: Yeah, absolutely. So Appalachian voices, uh, which they became the, the namesake plaintiff. Appalachian voices, um, had a Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Grant. And those grants in that grant program was designed to be relatively small amounts of money, in this case, $500,000, to come up with a community-based problem solving model where they would address some problem in their community. And Appalachian voices worked with five communities in

rural southwest Virginia who are dealing with the legacy impacts of the coal industry. And so they're particularly looking at some of these towns that had thrived, um, earlier under the coal industry, and were now sort of dealing with some of the impacts of that and how to rebuild.

So they were looking at abandoned mines. They're looking at flooding implications on some of the rivers and tributaries and trying to develop economic revitalization plans. The town of Pound, Virginia, had dilapidated buildings that had mold in asbestos and they were looking to build a flood mitigating Riverwalk to go through the town again, to make the town more desirable, but also to prevent against, impending rainstorms, So these sorts of projects in developing these sorts of projects, um, in rural Virginia was, was one particular grant program that was very close to the ground. Another example in High Point, North Carolina, which again has a very high poverty rate for North Carolina. The Southwest Renewal Foundation had a community change grant. these community change grants were much larger in scale. So this one was $18 million, but it was to do things like assess and repair sewer lines and to provide flood control plant trees, and another component of this grant was to convert an old warehouse into a trade center for the Guilford Technical Community College to be able to train workers to retrofit houses for environmental purposes. The grant also included money for the local elementary school, um, to upgrade its HVAC system, to have clean air and a cleaner energy source, so more energy efficient.

Ariana Brocious: There's so many projects,

Ben Grillot: So many projects.

Ariana Brocious: So all these projects, all this money awarded begins to flow. Um, president Trump's second term began in January, 2025, and very quickly he issued a series of executive orders, many of which directed Federal agencies to close environmental justice offices cease some of the environmental justice related programs. So the grants that we've been talking about were frozen, some were terminated. And what was the reasoning given at that time by the Trump administration?

Ben Grillot: So at that time, very little reason was provided for the freezing and termination of these grants. In March of 2025, SELC and some partner organizations filed Sustainability Institute versus Trump, our first lawsuit in South Carolina. And in part, uh, we wanted to know what happened. So we asked the court to order discovery. We asked for information as to why these grant programs have been frozen and terminated, and as a result of that, the court granted our request for discovery and we ended up getting a declaration from the EPA administrator who said that on a single day in February, 2025, Travis Voyles, the deputy Administrator of the EPA, decided to eliminate these entire programs, not individual grants, but the entire programs because they did not align with administration policies. And that was the information, that was the reasoning that they gave. So that rationale, um, did not consider any of the circumstances of any of these individual grants. It's not like they looked at this grant to High Point North Carolina and said, does it make sense to provide sewer lines or to improve the, you know HVAC systems at this local elementary school. They decided to eliminate the entire program, all $3 billion of EPA funding, because it didn't align with their policies.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. And you know, there was a slew of changes that the Trump administration brought in last year, a real like deregulatory, anti-science agenda. And this is just one piece of that. The Trump administration said that the environmental justice program was part of the green new scam, as he called it. How have the groups that you've been working with responded to those claims that this was, you know, kind of somehow like a partisan, uh, program, or maybe not even partisan, but you know, that it shouldn't have been funded.

Ben Grillot: Um, I think the organizations that are directly affected by this certainly didn't see the work that was being done in their communities through a political lens. I think they saw real needs in their communities and they were working to address them and felt disappointed and frustrated that this funding, uh, that they had hoped and relied on, um, to, to bring benefits, real benefits to their communities, was being pulled away from them without reason or explanation.

Ariana Brocious: Okay, so in May of 2025, the EPA sends notices that their grants have been terminated. The Southern Environmental Law Center, EarthJustice, and other law firms challenged this on behalf of a coalition of nonprofits and local governments. What was the legal basis for your suit?

Ben Grillot: So. We essentially had two bases for our suit. Uh, the first was a constitutional argument that this violated the separation of powers. Congress said, you shall spend $3 billion for X purpose. EPA had gone ahead and effectuated that spending. Um, and this administration said, no. We don't want to, and that violates the executive branches is then stepping on Congress's clear mandate. Our second argument sort of turns on this idea that the government should turn square corners with its citizens and make decisions in a reasonable manner. And the Administrative Procedure Act provides how the government decision making can and should be evaluated. Essentially says it shouldn't be arbitrary and capricious. And so our argument was that these decisions to eliminate an entire grant program on a single day without considering the individual grants underneath it was arbitrary and capricious.

Ariana Brocious: And you know, there's a lot of legal strategy used often in, in lawsuits in sort of particular ways of phrasing things. But I'll just distill what you said in layman's terms as I understand it, which is basically like, this isn't really legal because Congress already said this money should be spent. You're, you're violating the, uh, as you said balance of power, but also it's not fair. It's just completely, uh, without any basis, there's no reason that they're giving for canceling this money. Is that, is that a fair assessment?

Ben Grillot: that's absolutely right. At bottom, this isn't fair. Um, and being able to say that's not fair is one of the reasons that I got into law and went to law school, and this is a perfect example of that. It wasn't as though they went through and evaluated these grants and said, well, these ones are okay and these ones aren't. These align with our policies. These don't. There was no considered decision making. It was just on a single day in February, 2025, a decision was made to eliminate an entire congressionally mandated program, and that's just not how government should work.

Ariana Brocious: So the lawsuit is moving through the courts. Um, at this point, what's happening with these projects that the grants were supposed to fund?

Ben Grillot: So it varies pretty widely. Um, in some cases, some of the grantees have managed to find alternative sources of funding and, and carry out their vision for the project as they initially intended it. Albeit without, um, support from these grants, others have had to curtail or pull back on their plans for, for some of this funding. So it can, it, it varies significantly sort of by the community, but at bottom, um, much of the work that was intended to be done, for example, in the High Point, North Carolina Southwest Renewal Foundation Grant, has not yet been done.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, I mean, can you just imagine trying to carry out a project when you're funding supply is so uncertain or just ends, just canceled to begin with? If they're not able to get the full funding that they were promised, what's at stake here?

Ben Grillot: Um, so what's at stake is, is a number of things. One is the specific impacts on these communities, the ability to upgrade the sewer system or repair the HVAC system in a particular

elementary school or plan for the economic development of these towns that have been impacted by the decline in the coal industry, but also it's bigger than that. It's more about holding the government to account and making sure that it turns square corners with its citizens, that it makes decisions fairly, that the rule of law is upheld, and that the relationships between the government and these communities in the south in particular, aren't undercut by arbitrary and capricious decision making.

Ariana Brocious: And I also think it's worth pointing out that. The purpose of this funding originally was to address people, communities, places that have seen disinvestment, underinvestment have been marginalized by the government thus far and are suffering because of that. And so it's really insult to injury to throw them this, funding stream and then pull it back, you know, and an undermine it, as you said, right outta the gate.

Ben Grillot: That's exactly right. And many of these communities have, have longstanding trust issues with the government generally, or the ability for people to come and, and recognize and correct these longstanding problems. And so in a situation in which a government stood up and was going to do just that, um, it's created a certain amount of disappointment, in these communities that expected to be able to receive these benefits and haven't been able to, and like you said, it's these communities that have for generations been suffering the impacts of pollution.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that's the heart of environmental injustice, right? Disproportionate burdens.

Ben Grillot: I mean, that's the longstanding point of environmental justice is that the, the economic impacts or the, the pollution impacts of much development in this country has fallen upon disadvantaged communities.

Ariana Brocious: So, even if your lawsuit is successful, um, what has been and will continue to be the impacts of freezing this funding for such a long period of time.

Ben Grillot: I think the biggest impact is going to be this loss of trust. Is this gonna happen every administration or administration to administration? And how do you plan for the long term? And how do you build upon, uh, resources in order to maximize where your community wants to be, in five years or 10 years or 15 years? And the fact that these grants were arbitrarily frozen and then eliminated, terminated on a program level, um, will cause some doubt amongst communities that want to engage in this kind of thing going forward.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. So there've been many, many, many lawsuits filed against the Trump administration for many reasons, including freezing and canceling funding and programs. 'cause it's not limited to just these programs we've been talking about. Some of these have seen success, um, others have not, obviously many are ongoing. What do you think are the chances that the coalition you're representing has a shot at winning this lawsuit?

Ben Grillot: I think we have very strong arguments and I think at bottom the decision to eliminate the entire program, um, for policy reasons. Is both arbitrary and capricious and unconstitutional. And the beauty of a justice system is that one can take, um, unfair things to the courts and have them resolved.

Ariana Brocious: Ben Grillot is a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. Thank you so much for joining us on Climate One and sharing the stories of these communities.

Ben Grillot: Thank you.

Kousha Navidar: The Sustainability Institute in Charleston, South Carolina, is one of the organizations involved in the class action lawsuit brought against the EPA. Bryan Cordell is the group's Executive Director. He says their work helps low-income families reduce their energy costs and make health and safety improvements to their homes.

Bryan Cordell: We're helping families that are really struggling to make ends meet. We live in a hot, humid climate, here in South Carolina. Many people, uh, particularly vulnerable families face high energy bills.part of what we do at the Sustainability Institute is help those families reduce their energy costs while making health and safety improvements in their home

South Carolina is also. You know, impacted by hurricanes and other, types of natural disasters, which are only intensifying. And so many of our communities are also under threat by that.

Kousha Navidar: In December 2024, The Sustainability Institute, in partnership with the city of North Charleston, and other partner organizations was awarded 11.4 million dollars as part of the EPA Environmental and Climate Justice Community Change Grant Program. The projects focused on the Union Heights Community in the city of North Charleston, a historically Black settlement community where many of the homes were originally constructed in early to mid 20th century.

Bryan Cordell: So it was really two different projects. One that focused on new construction of affordable housing units, and then the other focusing on, uh, existing homes that are in need of repair. The community has faced, uh, all kinds of legacy, environmental, problems this was for, really a dream project that they knew would, would ultimately help, hundreds of individuals the community was just overjoyed when they found out that this, grant was happening.

Kousha Navidar: With the grant funding, 50 existing homes in the Union heights community in need of substantial repair and weatherization upgrading would be retrofitted. This would make the homes safer and lower energy bills, easing the financial strain on families.

Bryan Cordell: You know, when we were going in and talking directly to families and inspecting their homes to understand what they needed, we saw a lot of urgent issues. There were homes that had active roof leaks where water was, you know, intruding into the home. Uh, we found gas leaks in homes, all kinds of health and safety problems that are critical, plumbing, repairs, electrical, uh, issues that, that needed to be immediately resolved.

Kousha Navidar: The other part of the grant would support the construction of affordable housing units in the Union Heights neighborhood.

Bryan Cordell: Over the years. they were subjected to some of the racist transportation policies of the 1960s. And our community change grant focused on a project to heal that.

Kousha Navidar: In the 1960s, an access road to the interstate was constructed in the Union Heights neighborhood. During the construction of the road, homes were taken by eminent domain. Families were separated and the community was essentially split in two. In 2018, the South Carolina transportation agency removed the access road, which left three acres of vacant land in the Union Heights neighborhood.

Bryan Cordell: The community for a long time had a vision to use that property, to build new affordable housing, which is desperately needed. And so part of the goal of this grant was to accomplish that dream.

Kousha Navidar: The grant would fund the construction of at least 10 affordable homes on the 3 acre site. When those homes were purchased the plan was to use the money to help fund 20 more

affordable homes. The neighborhood, for the first time in 60 years, would be reconnected. But the grants were frozen in January 2025 by the Trump administration. There was a period where funding was available, then it wasn't, then it was again, and they were able to get some work done. But as of now, the project is in limbo.

Bryan Cordell: There's some urgency to this work because families are facing crisis in their homes. And so, you know, what's truly disappointing is if you have funding that is sort of ready to go, ready to help families immediately, and then you're not able to do that work.

Kousha Navidar: The EPA's official letter to the Sustainability Institute said the grant was terminated "on the grounds that the award no longer effectuates the program goals or agency priorities." It said by law, the agency must ensure that " The Agency's grants do not support programs or organizations that promote or take part in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives or "environmental justice" initiatives"

Bryan Cordell: We have clear evidence that the administration didn't just terminate individual grants, but entire grant programs. sort of claiming now that there's no such thing as environmental justice or not being able to use that language is really disappointing when you look at what these communities have faced historically, and it's impossible to ignore the legacy, pollution problems and disinvestment that's happened in these communities over time. But this project at its heart is about keeping families safe and secure in their homes and addressing health problems in the community and reducing pollution and building affordable housing and, and, you know, helping build resiliency in a, in a community. And so, you know, if that is the stated goals of the EPA, then this project should align perfectly with the agency priorities. We're real hopeful that, this will turn out favorably, through the courts. Um, in the meantime, we're doing everything that we can to sort of patch together funding to keep the project alive and, and particularly to help the families that are in urgent need right now.

Music: in

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, how those committed to climate resilience are keeping projects moving even without federal support.

Wahleah Johns: I think that there is this resilience we have, too. And the only parts that come up in me during those times are just the strength and wisdom that we carry as native people.

Ariana Brocious: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Music: out

Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One, I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious. Tribes across the country have been challenged by energy poverty for decades. When the US government moved to electrify rural communities in the 1930s, tribal land was mostly excluded. Some of the Inflation Reduction Act grants that we've been talking about today were meant to finally address this issue – nearly a hundred years on – by supporting the development of clean energy projects on tribal lands.

Kousha Navidar: the Trump administration pulled much of that funding. Wahleah Johns was the Director of the U.S. Department Of Energy Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs during the Biden administration. Now, she is working on a just transition for tribal nations.

Wahleah Johns: Growing up on the Navajo reservation, I think looking back was a unique

experience I grew up in a really rural remote place Uh, my grandmother raised sheep Also, we had a spring nearby and we used to go and get water. we all slept on the floor in one, uh, room structures called hogans and dirt floors. And that's how our traditional homes are, the doors face to the east and they're these octagon shaped homes. Which is a the philosophy of life is embedded in our home where the east is, you know, welcoming the sunlight and represents the thinking, the planning, and then as it goes, uh, clockwise around the fireplace in the center, that represents the stages of life and growth and development. So, um, lots of beautiful. symbolism in our home, in our land, in the way of life that I grew up that was very connected to who we are as Navajo, Diné people to our language, to ceremonial ways, to our seasons. And yeah, it was, it was beautiful, simple. And I, I'm glad I grew up in that way.

Kousha Navidar: your home description sounds beautiful, you, you painted such a vivid picture in my mind. Um, did you have electricity? What was electricity access like?

Wahleah Johns: We did not have electricity and we used kerosene lanterns in the evening time when it got dark. And we pretty much were guided by the sunlight. So, you know, we did our best to get up early in the morning before the sun rose, and everyone goes to sleep when the sun goes down. So that was pretty much the cycle that I knew. Um, and I don't think it was until like the mid eighties, my grandmother was gifted a solar battery storage system and actually we didn't really use it, uh, because she was afraid, I think, of wearing out the battery. And so we didn't even, we still use lanterns and generators, uh, to power electricity.

Kousha Navidar: Well, you know, when the United States built a lot of its energy structure back in the thirties, tribal lands were largely excluded, which you experienced in your home, and now about 54,000 tribal members still lack access to electricity. So your story is echoed through a lot of other people's experiences on tribal lands, and that's according to the Department of Energy. So why is getting energy access to these communities so tough?

Wahleah Johns: I think it's one policy. As you mentioned, the 1923 electrification act And sadly they did leave out tribes in that design and access to transmission.

So the Navajo Nation, um, you know, for years and today, there's a lot of families that still don't have access to power lines. And my grandmother actually, with this solar and battery storage I told you about, we didn't really use it and I, I think the other part was that the people who installed it, weren't great at informing my grandmother and us you know, when to utilize it. And so I think it wasn't until maybe the two thousands that my grandmother finally got grid-tied power. And so, you know,the struggle with families who don't have access to a refrigerator or, um, to charge their cell phones today is something that I, I feel like is very important to our health and productivity as people.

Kousha Navidar: I wanted to ask about that energy access that you're describing. For decades, the Navajo Nation supplied electricity into the larger Western US grid without actually seeing those benefits at home.

Wahleah Johns: Absolutely. Um, so our lands where I'm from, ironically powered the whole entire southwest, the west with their power needs. And, uh, the pristine water resources that we live on in the Black Mesa region in northern Arizona. Um, there was millions of tons of coal that was extracted for over 50 years to supply power generating stations in Nevada and in Arizona to create affordable power to the west and yet over the hill, you had a lot of families that didn't have electricity.

Kousha Navidar: Well, the reason I wanted to bring that up, you later in life, in January of 2021. were appointed to lead the US Department of Energy Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs.

Your rich personal history, uh, I'm, I'm sure, influenced that role. Can you tell me a little bit about how it did?

Wahleah Johns: I knew the power struggles that exist in definitely in my communities. And, I think the, also the economic development opportunities that tribes could be a part of. You know, we look at this big coal mining and power generating station in my backyard. Even though it was called Navajo Generating Station, Navajo Nation didn't have an ownership stake in that power generation. The only revenues that we received were through the sale of coal. And I think that that's limiting, you know, to the economic, um, longevity of tribal nations, when it comes to, even now, this new revolution of clean energy is that we don't wanna repeat the um, way energy deals are structured today, that we wanna make it equitable.

We wanna make it participatory of people, community of nations, tribal nations, to be able to be active in the clean energy economy. And so that's what helped me to get really excited about the role and then also to address the energy access issue, um, pushing for more investment to connect people to power lines, but also provide funding for microgrids and reliable power and to overcome the heavy energy burdens that Native American face every day.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, I see a challenge there of course, as well, because every tribal community is different. So given your work, did you find common challenges that came up again and again that you were trying to address?

Wahleah Johns: Capacity, people capacity, staff capacity. At the tribal level, we have 574 federally-recognized tribes. Many of those leaders in those tribes wear multiple hats. For example, I went to Alaska visit with a community called, uh, Chefornak, which is in a rural, southwestern part of Alaska, uh, village,uh, less than 150 people. And you have the leader there that is wearing five different hats, you know, because they don't have the, um, budget or capacity to hire more people, you know, that wear one hat, which is an energy hat. That's just a hundred percent focused on

Kousha Navidar: But they're doing like energy. They're doing sanitation.

Wahleah Johns: in multiple things. Yes. and, and then you have tribal nations that are well resourced, right? And they have those people and they're the ones that are actually designing and planning out their energy future. which is great, but I'm giving you the range of, um, lack of capacity that, uh, that I saw that could be helpful and, um, started to look through strategies on making sure we're investing in tribes to be able to have that energy manager, right, that they have people in place. So they're, they're coordinating with tribal leaders on the federal opportunities, like we recently have with Inflation Reduction Act and the bipartisan infrastructure law that was billions of dollars that were, you know, coming out of the federal government that I just also saw tribes not being able to access because they didn't have the people on the other side. And on top of that, many of these tribes, you know, when it comes to applying for grants online, didn't have wifi, you know, to be able to upload their application to send it to the federal government. I mean, things like that, we, we don't think about. I think, uh, we think everyone has access to connectivity, electricity, uh, water. And there's a lot of people that still don't.

Kousha Navidar: So when you started, the department's budget was seven to $10 million annually, which was supposed to cover all of your programs throughout the entire country. And by the time you left, four years later, in 2025, the budget increased to $75 million annually. How did that happen?

Wahleah Johns: Uh, wow. It, it was a lot of coordination with our staff. It was a lot of conversations with members of Congress and also, federal, uh. Congressional committees, right? And that maybe

aren't as aware of the on the ground impacts that tribes are facing when it comes to energy burden, when it comes to not having staff capacity. And painting, sort of that picture for them is like, this is what it looks like on the ground. We need more investment and support, and this is the vision that we have in helping to support tribal nations to be more robust, you know, have energy sovereignty and be able to sustain power for a really long time.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. And you know, you had mentioned the Inflation Reduction Act. Um, so in addition to your department's funding president, Biden's Inflation Reduction Act and the bipartisan infrastructure law, they brought. Billions of dollars of investments to support tribes and native communities and climate resilience and clean energy and infrastructure projects, which is what you're describing. I'm wondering how that money actually reached communities on the ground. What did it look like? What was it going towards?

Wahleah Johns: Oh, it was, uh, maybe the. Most powerful climate investment and um, also an investment for strengthening our energy security in the us. and opportunities for community states, tribes to be engaged in the economic development of our energy infrastructure on the ground. What it looked like for tribes was over, um, $500 million of energy infrastructure to solve energy access, to solve, um, the energy burden that tribal nations face, but also be a part of the solution. And creating, um, transmission corridors that are supplying rural, remote places in different communities and states.

Kousha Navidar: Can you tell me what that infrastructure was? Are we talking like solar arrays? Are we talking like power transmitters? Like what, what did it look like on the ground?

Wahleah Johns: It looked like solar microgrids. also the transmission and thinking about putting transmission lines under the ground rather than above as a robust way to weather climate impacts. I think microgrids are fascinating. technology where you're using solar battery storage and, and for example, I, I'll give you an

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, please. I, I also find grid technology to be very interesting too, so

Wahleah Johns: Okay. Okay. So up in Northern California, it's a tribe called the Blue Lake Rancheria. They establish, uh, solar, um, battery storage, microgrid. They had a huge forest fire that went through their lands, um, and created a lot of power outages. And so as a, as part of like, you know, being more prepared in emergency response, they designed this microgrid to be able to, shut off power and disconnect and create power for their own nation, It was fun to see Department of Energy get over 10 billion out the door and address some of the critical infrastructure that has been facing these challenges.And sadly, many of these investments have been terminated.

Kousha Navidar: yeah, let's go to the rollbacks and that is kind of the next step in the story that happened in January, 2025. Rollbacks to the Inflation reduction Act really started. Some of the money stopped flowing, and so I'm wondering how your community responded to that.

Wahleah Johns: I mean, I personally had a hard time witnessing the terminations, the cutbacks, um, the language that was coming from the Trump administration saying that solar and wind is not gonna be an investment anymore. And also, um, coal is gonna resurge again. And that's, you know, our position. And I, you know, coming from a coal community, I just know it's not economical, And I also as tribes, as a tribal person, we, we've gone through so much in this country for over 500 years and you know, what's happening today, the sentiment I feel like throughout Indian country is just like, oh gosh. Like this is really sad. This is really intense. Um, you know, our people actually have, we all have a memory in our body, right, of things kind of not going in, aligned with, you know, the values of who we are as, as indigenous peoples. And so, um, yeah, I think that there is this, um,

resilience we have too. And, uh, the only parts that come up in me, you know, during those times are just the strength and wisdom that we carry as native people. And that we understand this is a land in, in this country, we have connection to. And a story and a narrative that is so powerful that, um, speaks to strength, that speaks to unity, that speaks to hope, that speaks to much of, the philosophy of life that we carry is the reason why we are still here that we, you know, they, they, they have not gotten rid of us. And I think that that's the part that, um, I'm really proud of, you know, of that narrative of Indigenous peoples, um, remaining, uh, really tightly connected to our land. This is our homeland. And so, yeah. And that's, that's the only thing I can offer right now, like in this moment.

Kousha Navidar: I can hear the resiliency in your, in your, in your voice. There's this shift in federal priorities and the loss of federal funding, how do you build capacity at this time as the dollars are being taken back?

Wahleah Johns: I think it's just being very innovative One, it's the coming together, right? And looking back, you know, a hundred years where we've come because there's appreciation of the resilience and it's also looking like a hundred years from now, like where are we going? And that kind of in between, if there are resources, we can get to this vision right of the future. I think that is really powerful. I've been working on, uh, developing a fund that's called the Four Directions Fund. And this is that capital investment that is needed to support, uh, tribal, renewable energy projects, uh, not just in the US but globally and, you know, indigenous peoples caretake about 20% of the landmass and many of that landmass is and globally is very biodiverse. You know, there's this richest, beautiful regions of the world, um, and a lot of these communities don't have access to electricity. They're facing the same challenges that you see in the US and many of them want microgrids or power source, you know, from the sun with battery storage.what I saw in my community, once we were able to get access to solar and battery storage, our productivity went up. You know, so the quality of life improves. And I think that if we can demonstrate it here in the US, we can demonstrate it in different parts of the world where we still see lack of access to capital, lack of access to, um that tribal energy sovereignty. Right. And this fund is really to position tribes and indigenous peoples as equity owners and to maximize the most benefits from these projects. to be able to have, um, a sense of equity and a project, but also, it generating something for the people is really important.

Kousha Navidar: Wahleah Johns is former director of the US Department of Energy, office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs. Wahleah, thank you so much for joining us on Climate one.

Wahleah Johns: Thank you for having me.

Music: In

Kousha Navidar: And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Greg Dalton, Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Biscieglia, Kousha Navidar and Rachael Lacey. Our theme music is by George Young. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Music: Out