

# Developing Solutions to Regulatory Challenges and Engaging Community Support to Expand Diversion of Food Waste to Anaerobic Digestion in the Northeast:

*Best Practices Guide for*  
**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**  
*with Environmental Justice Populations*



# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Understanding What it Means to Site a Facility in an EJ Area .....	3
Learning About the Community .....	4
What is Community Engagement and Why it is Important .....	5
Community Engagement Methods .....	6
Beyond Regulatory Requirements.....	9
Supplemental Materials.....	9
About the Organizations:.....	9
Acknowledgments .....	10

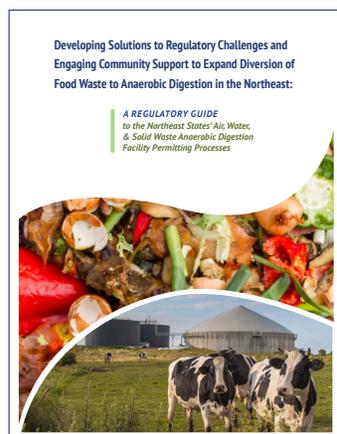


## INTRODUCTION

Many state and local entities are enacting regulations, policies, and initiatives to advance environmental justice and are increasingly focusing on engaging with environmental justice communities (EJ areas) they have identified based on racial, ethnic, and economic demographics. These communities have significant numbers of low-income people, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and vulnerable populations, such as non-native English speakers, the elderly, children, and those with pre-existing medical conditions. Due to systemic racism and classism, environmental justice communities often experience disproportionate and adverse human health, environmental, climate-related, and other cumulative impacts resulting from waste management, transportation, and other industrial or commercial activities. Anaerobic digestion (AD) facilities, like any waste handling, processing, and recycling operation, may be sited in these communities.

This Guide is intended to be a resource for AD facility developers prior to siting an AD facility, as well as for management and staff of an existing facility. The best practices provided in the Guide are applicable to AD facilities located in EJ and non-EJ areas. The Guide is also intended to assist AD developers, management, and staff with understanding what it takes to be a good environmental steward of the community by going above and beyond federal, state, and local requirements.

A complementary Guide, **Developing Solutions to Regulatory Challenges and Engaging Community Support to Expand Diversion of Food Waste to Anaerobic Digestion in the Northeast: A Regulatory Guide to the Northeast States' Air, Water, & Solid Waste Anaerobic Digestion Facility Permitting Processes**



“AD Regulatory Guide”) provides a high-level overview of AD regulations for the permits that may be required for a proposed AD facility as it relates to different air, solid waste, and water requirements in the eleven Northeast States of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont. In addition, the AD Regulatory Guide includes the environmental justice requirements or considerations that states have during the permitting process of siting or constructing a new AD facility.

## UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT MEANS TO SITE A FACILITY IN AN EJ AREA

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.<sup>1</sup> Many Northeast states define environmental justice beyond EPA’s definition and have existing requirements, or are in the process of developing requirements, for entities like an AD facility, looking to site in a state-designated EJ area.

There are significant responsibilities for AD developers when selecting a site location. To the extent practicable, developers are encouraged to conduct an alternative analysis comparison and consider viable locations outside of communities that already bear a disproportionate burden. EJ areas are typically identified as being overburdened with negative environmental and health impacts. In addition to meeting specific local, state, and federal regulatory and permitting requirements for air, solid waste, and water, AD facilities must also comply with environmental justice requirements.

When assessing possible locations for a new AD facility, entities should consider the following questions:

- What are the geographic constraints for siting the facility (e.g., proximity to food waste sources)?
- What are the socioeconomic conditions in the communities identified as suitable venues for the planned AD facility?
- Which locations in non-EJ areas are viable?
- What are the health and environmental impacts of the AD facility’s operations?

1. Learn About Environmental Justice, USEPA, 2023 [https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice#:~:text=Environmental%20justice%20\(EJ\)%20is%20the,environmental%20laws%2C%20regulations%20and%20policies](https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice#:~:text=Environmental%20justice%20(EJ)%20is%20the,environmental%20laws%2C%20regulations%20and%20policies)

- What safeguards, contingency, and emergency plans will be put in place to ensure the safety of the surrounding community?

The answers to these questions are not only important when considering where to site an AD facility, but imperative when considering the wellbeing of community members. The answers will also inform facility staff when engaging with community members via virtual meetings, hosting in-person forums and other events, or producing community outreach materials.

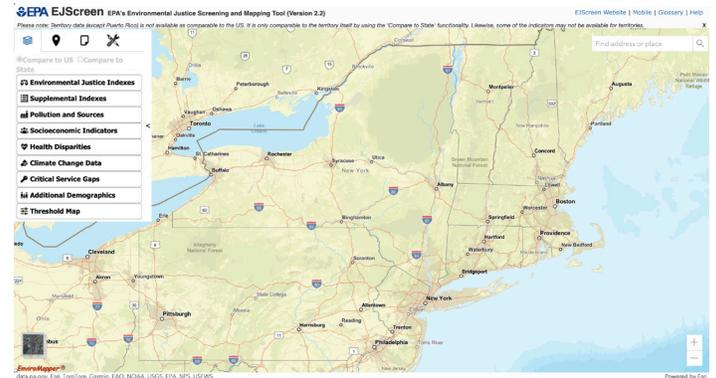
At the start of the planning process, developers should strive to become an integral part of the identified neighborhood and connect with residents. The EPA defines environmental stewardship as the responsibility for environmental quality shared by all those whose actions affect the environment.<sup>2</sup> To become an environmental steward for the community, developers should be proactive in going beyond the state environmental justice requirements. The steps to becoming an environmental steward involve industry recognizing their role in the community, holding ongoing public events to engage directly with community members and soliciting their input, and becoming part of the community.

## Learning About the Community

All communities are unique and include different economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, languages spoken, and cultures. Prior to engaging with community members, developers should conduct research to develop both a broad and focused understanding of the people who live there. The US Census Data is a primary resource for developing the big picture view of the community demographics.<sup>3</sup> The search engine on the home page can be used to find the population, income level, employment, age, race, and languages spoken in a specific geographic location.



Learning about an EJ area's current or past negative environmental impacts is an integral part of learning about the community. Resources, like environmental justice mapping tools, should be utilized to gather information about the environmental and health stressors of an individual community. EJScreen, developed by the EPA, uses environmental and demographic indicators.<sup>4</sup> Information about a certain location can be found by entering an address into the search engine. The area will be shown on a map, and the affected areas highlighted. Data about these areas is available by hovering over the section(s) of interest.



The Council on Environmental Equality also has an environmental justice mapping tool—The Council on Environmental Equality, Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool.<sup>5</sup> This tool provides data about disadvantaged community thresholds for environmental, climate, and socioeconomic burdens in the United States and its territories. Similar to the EJScreen, information about a certain location can be found by entering an address into the search engine.

Individual states may have their own environmental justice mapping or screening tools. For example, New York State manages DECinfo Locator, to provide map-based access to information about facilities that are permitted to emit pollution or store toxic chemicals.<sup>6</sup> Developers should use a variety of environmental justice tools to gather the necessary information about the community to better understand the existing conditions of the area where the facility may be sited. Search online for local newspaper articles, television news, and social media postings to help garner additional information about the community's way of life, culture, and local happenings. It is also important to become familiar with the local community organizations and the work they do with residents to better understand the community's environmental and health burdens, and resident concerns.

2. Everyday Choices: Opportunities For Environmental Stewardship, P. 2.; USEPA, 2005 <https://archive.epa.gov/stewardship/web/pdf/rpt2admin.pdf>  
 3. US Census Data, US Census Bureau, 2020 <https://data.census.gov/>  
 4. EJScreen, United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2023 <https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen>  
 5. Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, Council on Environmental Equality, 2022 <https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#10.05/39.9703/-74.4178>  
 6. DECinfo Locator, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, <https://gisservices.dec.ny.gov/gis/dil/>



### **What is Community Engagement and Why it is Important**

On a broad level, good community engagement helps build positive relations between an entity seeking to build an AD facility and the community in which it will be located. When it comes to achieving environmental justice, this is even more critical, as people in EJ areas have already been disproportionately impacted by environmental harms and socioeconomic disparities. A thoughtful approach to community engagement has the power to build trust between residents and industry.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, a lack of thoughtful, proactive, and transparent community engagement has demonstrated opposition to private development of projects, like AD, by community members.<sup>8</sup>

If you determine that it is necessary to site a new facility in an EJ area (and, generally, in all siting processes), it is important to have a productive dialogue between your entity and community residents to learn about residents’ interests and concerns with the facility coming into their neighborhood, share your initial plans for development, educate residents about the specific technologies and potential impacts, and together refine proposals to be mutually beneficial. By including residents in the planning and decision-making process, you can ensure that those most impacted by a proposed facility are fully involved in the facility’s design—anticipated hours of operation, types

and volume of traffic, transportation routes, technologies to maximize benefits while minimizing negative impacts, job training and hiring from the community, and more.<sup>9</sup> This will dramatically increase the likelihood of community acceptance and support during the permitting and public comment phase. Without community support, there is a high risk of the facility being unsuccessful.

The first step to meaningful engagement is to develop a community engagement strategy. Identify outreach and engagement goals, anticipated accomplishments, and the role that community members may possibly play in participating in the industry’s decision-making processes. The decision-making process is defined as identifying the decisions to be made, collecting the information needed to make the decisions, assessing possible solutions, and implementing the final decisions.<sup>10</sup> Community engagement is part of the decision-making process. Consulting with and gathering input from the community will help inform decisions to be made. Once the planning process is completed and you are applying for a permit, it is important to communicate the final proposal and how input from the community was solicited and incorporated into the final plan.

The Collective Impact Forum illustrates a spectrum of community engagement strategies and their potential impact on decision-making in the following table (Table 1).



**Image 1. Decision-making Process**

7. Metropolitan Area Planning Council <https://www.mapc.org/our-work/services-for-cities-towns/community-engagement/>  
 8. Patch News, 2022 <https://patch.com/new-jersey/newarknj/human-waste-processing-plant-table-newark-aries-nixes-plan>  
 9. Community Engagement Toolkit, Collective Impact Forum, 2017 <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resource/community-engagement-toolkit/>  
 10. Decision-Making Process, UMASS Dartmouth <https://www.umassd.edu/fycm/decision-making/process/#:~:text=Decision%20making%20is%20the%20process,relevant%20information%20and%20defining%20alternatives>  
 11. Community Engagement Toolkit, Collective Impact Forum (Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation), 2017 <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resource/community-engagement-toolkit/>

**TABLE 1: INCREASING IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION<sup>11</sup>**

<b>INFORMING</b>	<b>CONSULTING</b>	<b>INVOLVING</b>	<b>COLLABORATING</b>	<b>EMPOWERING</b>
Providing balanced and objective information about new programs or services, and about the reasons for choosing them	Inviting feedback on alternatives, analyses, and decisions related to new programs or services	Working with community members to ensure that their aspirations and concerns are considered at every stage of planning and decision-making. We also engage their assets as partners to implement solutions.	Enabling community members to participate in every aspect of planning and decision-making for new programs or services. Community members actively produce outcomes.	Giving community members sole decision-making authority over new programs or services, and lead work to implement solutions. Professionals only serve in consultative and supportive roles
We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to your input and feedback, and let you know your ideas and concerns have influenced decisions	We will ensure your input and feedback is directly reflected in alternatives, and let you know how your involvement influenced decisions. We will engage you as partners to implement solutions.	We will co-create and co-produce solutions with you. You will be true partners in making and implementing decisions for the community, your advice and recommendations will be incorporated as much as possible.	We will support your decisions and work to implement solutions.
Fact sheets, newsletters, websites, open houses	Surveys, focus groups, community meetings and forums	Community organizing, leadership development, workshops	Advisory boards, seats on governing boards, engaging and funding as partners	Support full governance, leadership, and partnership

### **Community Engagement Methods**

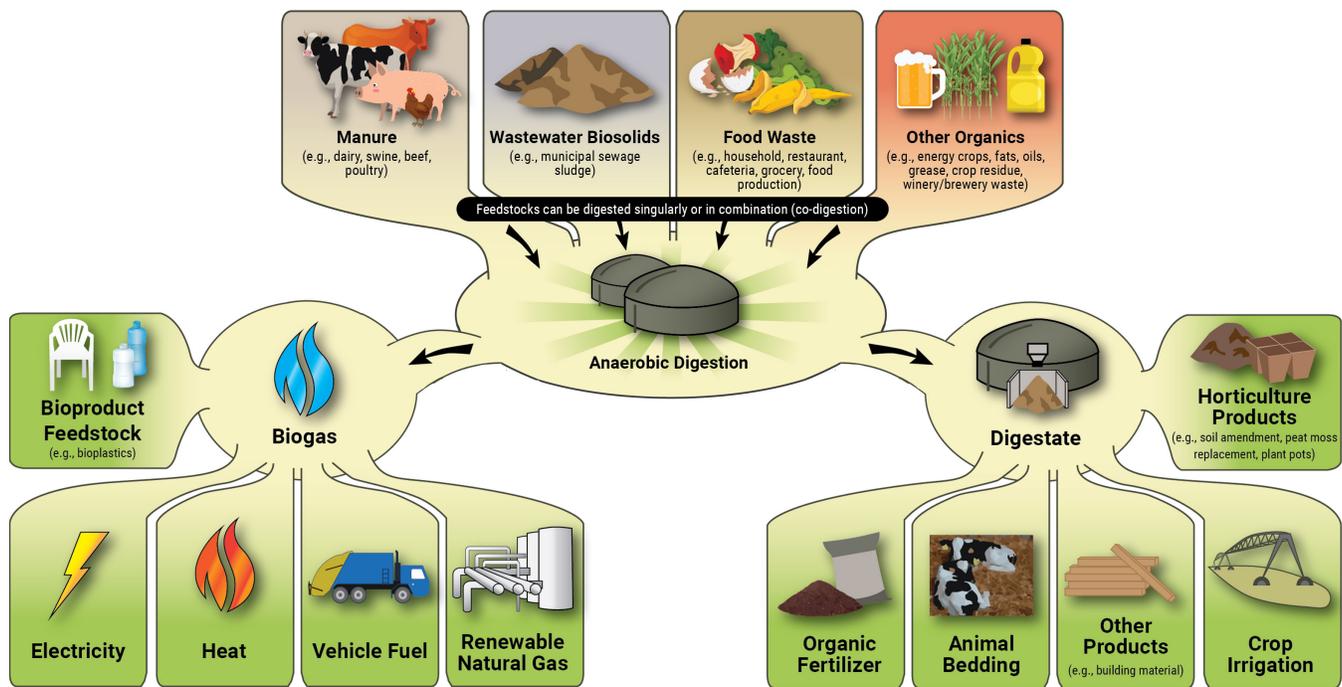
When engaging with the community, it is important to use a variety of methods to reach as many community members as possible. To understand how to effectively communicate and connect with community members, in the information gathering process, consider:

- Languages spoken, for example:
  - A translation of written materials may be necessary to disseminate the information.
  - An interpreter may be required at in-person meetings.
  - There may be a need for sign language if there are residents with hearing impairment.
- Accessibility to the internet, computers, mobile devices, and bandwidth (e.g., many residents may have cell phones but limited data plans, and some members may only have data or internet access when publicly provided at libraries, or other designated parts of the community).

- Hosting meetings at common spaces, like libraries, public buildings, or places of worship, among others, that are often well-attended and easily accessible. It may be easier to secure space at a private venue, but it may not be accessible to most community members.
- Transportation modes and accessibility. Timing and location should be accessible via public transit or by walking, or have ample space for parking.



11. Community Engagement Toolkit, Collective Impact Forum (Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation), 2017 <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resource/community-engagement-toolkit/>



### Informing Community Members

Develop informational materials for distribution in print and online versions. These could include fact sheets, notices about open forums (see below), links to your website, etc. Consider mailing print communications at least once to the closest and most impacted community residents. You can also be creative by using social media and short videos to attract the attention of and micro-target relevant neighborhoods.

### Community-based Communications

When developing information about the AD facility for community members, avoid using a marketing pitch approach. Transparency is key for effective community engagement. Include detailed and factual information in all verbal and written communications. Community members should be provided with an understanding of the anaerobic digestion process, facility operations, and potential health and environmental impacts of the facility.

Develop verbal presentations and written materials with the assumption that community members are unfamiliar with AD. The approach taken should be similar to teaching an Introduction to Anaerobic Digestion or middle-school level course.

- Use plain language and avoid technical language, like acronyms or industry terms.
- Provide visual information, like sketches of an intended facility, or aerial photos or video footage of an existing facility during in-person meetings and in print materials and digital content.

- Share details about your proposed size and exact location.
- Increase awareness of AD by providing:
  - An overview of the anaerobic digestion process,
  - A description of the materials accepted at the facility,
  - The operations necessary to successfully run the facility,
  - The products produced (including used and discarded products),
  - How such products will be used or disposed of,
  - Any contingency plans in place in case of an emergency.
- Share the intended hours of operation, the number of trucks expected per hour, the likelihood and nature of air and water pollution, and the potential issues that may arise at an AD facility and how the issues will be addressed.
- Follow through publicly on any requests for additional information or follow-up that emerge from the process.

### Open Forums

Open forums are a great way to inform, consult, and involve community residents.<sup>12</sup> Open forums are in-person dialogue sessions between the hosting industry and all community members. It is important to note that these events must go beyond introducing and sharing information about the planned AD facility (which is only stage 1, “Informing” in Table 1, above). Such meetings should ensure the opportunity for local residents’ interests and concerns to be heard, acknowledged, and considered. Developers can encourage community members to bring laptops or notebooks and/or provide notepads and pens at the open forums for notetaking.

12. Engaging With Diverse Communities, Northeast Recycling Council’s DE&I Training Series, 2022 <https://necr.org/documents/DEI/DEI%20Training%204%20Presentation%20Berenice%20Garcia%20Tellez%20%20Jose%20Luis%20Ramos%20Slides.pdf>



Regularly occurring open forums offered during the planning stages demonstrate a continued interest in community members and what they have to say, while fostering candid conversations with the community, and has the potential to start building trusting relationships with community members.

Key components for a successful open forum:

- Hold the forum at a venue in which community members consider to be a trusted, accessible, communal location such as a library or community room.
- The meeting location should be accessible to people in the way they usually travel. In populated areas, this includes by foot and by public transportation for those who may not have access to a vehicle.
- Set the meeting times around the common working hours in the community to facilitate the most attendance by community members.
- Ensure accessibility. Make sure the meeting space is large enough to hold a crowd, and accessible to people of all abilities:
  - Enough space for people in wheelchairs, those using walkers, and families with strollers.
  - Access for wheelchairs, walkers, and baby strollers, including ramps and elevator access to reach the meeting room.
- Make it easy for people to hear each other. Microphones should be used to ensure that presenters and community members can hear and actively participate in the conversation.
- Create a welcoming atmosphere with working air conditioning and heating, and access to comfortable seating for the older population.

- For those not able to attend in person, consider offering remote participation, virtual-only events, and/or the option to hear the discussion through a recording if unable to attend.
- Make sure the people who attend on behalf of your entity are part of the project design, not just tasked with communicating with the community.
- For the best results, hold more than one meeting. After presenting the project concept, soliciting feedback, making any necessary revisions, meet with the community again.
- It is also suggested to offer light refreshments for all attendees, and childcare for parents with young children.

Make sure you reach community members in ample time to maximize participation:

- Send press releases to local and online newspapers and public broadcast stations on the radio or television.
- Post on social media event pages relevant to the community.
- Notify local community organizations.
- Post flyers in common community centers, libraries, businesses, and social service offices.

In addition to adhering to the state environmental justice requirements, AD facilities can focus on inclusivity by hiring people from within the community. To do this, it is necessary to make job announcements accessible throughout the community and encourage applicants. Outreach should be done through engagement with local community organizations; posting flyers at local establishments; sharing announcements on social media, posting in online newspapers, on local radio stations, and public access television stations; and/or holding a job fair for residents.



## ***Beyond Regulatory Requirements***

State and federal regulatory requirements for community engagement in EJ areas often ends with the “consulting” phase. Best practices dictate that companies go beyond this stage, and meaningfully work with the community they plan to join through the siting of their facility, and throughout the design, construction, and functioning phases of the facility. Engaging the community to say that you did it is insufficient, and when done poorly or as one-way communication can generate significant opposition.

Consider how your entity could apply collaboration and empowerment strategies with community members to develop a plan that meets your goals while best serving the host community. This could include ongoing advisory boards with meaningful abilities to shape ongoing operations, paid positions for community involvement, and genuinely giving community members the ability to shape the final outcome of the project.

## ***Supplemental Materials***

The Northeast Waste Management Officials’ Association (NEWMOA) & the Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) have created additional materials outlining the requirements for air, solid waste, and water permits, and any environmental justice requirements when AD Developers are proposing new construction of an AD facility, called the Regulatory Guide.

NEWMOA & NERC have also developed a “What’s AD & How Can I Get Involved?” Roadmap for community members to understand a high-level overview of AD, environmental justice considerations, and how they can get involved in the AD decision-making process. Scan the QR codes to learn more about the Regulatory Guide & “What’s AD & How Can I Get Involved?” Roadmap.

### ***Regulatory Guide***



### ***What’s AD & How Can I Get Involved? (English)***



### ***What’s AD & How Can I Get Involved? (Spanish)***



## ***About the Organizations:***

### ***The Northeast Waste Management Officials’ Association (NEWMOA)***



NEWMOA is a non-profit, non-partisan, interstate association whose membership is composed of the state environment agency programs that address pollution prevention, toxics use reduction, sustainability, materials management, hazardous waste, solid waste, emergency response, waste site cleanup, underground storage tanks, and related environmental challenges in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

### ***NEWMOA’s Mission***

NEWMOA provides a strategic forum for effectively solving environmental problems through collaborative regional initiatives that advance pollution prevention and sustainability, promote safer alternatives to toxic materials in products, identify and assess emerging contaminants, facilitate adaption

to climate change, mitigate greenhouse gas sources, promote reuse and recycling of wastes and diversion of organics; support proper management of hazardous and solid wastes, and facilitate clean-up of contaminant releases to the environment.

### ***The Northeast Recycling Council (NERC)***

NERC is a multi-state 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose programs emphasize source reduction, reuse, recycling, composting, environmentally preferable purchasing (EPP), and decreasing the toxicity of the solid waste stream in the 11-state region comprised of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

### ***NERC’s Mission***

NERC’s mission is to minimize waste, conserve natural resources, and advance a sustainable economy through facilitated collaboration and action.



## Clean+Healthy



Clean+Healthy is a nonprofit organization with a mission to build a just and healthy society where toxic chemicals are simply unthinkable. We work to enact and implement laws that protect human health and the environment, foster positive changes in the national marketplace, and empower people to engage on their own behalf. Based in Albany, NY, their work telescopes from community engagement to national impact.

## Connecticut Coalition for Economic and Environmental Justice (CT CEEJ)

CT CEEJ works to eliminate or mitigate the environmental injustices borne by low income and communities of color and to provide a seat at the table where rules, laws, and policies regarding the environment are formulated and implemented.

The mission of Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice is to protect urban environments primarily in Connecticut through educating communities, through promoting changes in local, state, and national policy, and through promoting individual, corporate and governmental responsibility towards our environment.

## Acknowledgments:

NEWMOA and the Team thank those who participated in the development of this guide as members of the Team, Steering Committee members, NERC-member states, and NEWMOA-member states.

### Contributors included:

Krishana Abraham-Petrie, NEWMOA  
Stephanie Frisch, NEWMOA  
Megan Fontes, NERC  
Mariane Medeiros, NERC  
Mary Ann Remolador, NERC  
Bobbi Wilding, Clean+Healthy  
Sharon Lewis, CT Coalition of Economic and Environmental Justice

The Team members worked collaboratively and reached consensus on the content represented in the Guide. Specific views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect those of the NEWMOA-member states, NERC-member states, Steering Committee members or the agencies or companies for whom they work, or United States EPA. Participation on the Project Team does not necessarily imply endorsement of the completed document or its usage. Mention of any company, process, or product names should not be considered an endorsement by any of the participants.

