

## ECOS to Prioritize Infrastructure, Environmental Justice, and PFAS



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**B**EN GRUMBLES, the executive director of the Environmental Council of the States, is taking the helm in a period marked by entrenched challenges but also fresh opportunities. Grumbles is charged with finding common ground and giving a collective voice to ECOS members—the state and territorial environmental agency leaders, who hail from states led by 28 Republican and 22 Democratic governors (prior to this fall's elections). While the political landscape remains sharply polarized, a respite from congressional gridlock has emerged in the form of record federal funding—in both the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022—to address climate change.

Grumbles is arguably better positioned than many environmental lawyers to convene state agency leaders, having served as the head of two state agencies and a major federal environmental program, among other positions, over the last several decades. In an interview, Grumbles explained that he was motivated to take the ECOS leadership position because he has observed “the power of a unified state voice to advance environmental protection and public health” and to “shape the national environmental dialogue.” Grumbles says it is his “personal goal” to ensure that ECOS remains a “purple and green” organization that does not become a “blue and red” balkanized group—a goal he views as particularly important given the central role states play in administering and enforcing many of the nation's environmental laws.

For now, however, front and center for ECOS is what Grumbles refers to as a “once-in-a-generation investment not only in infrastructure but climate and equity.” He is cognizant of the tremendous “responsibility” and “increased

expectations” placed on state environmental leaders for ensuring that infrastructure investments are made wisely.

In pursuing these “unprecedented opportunities,” Grumbles wants to ensure that states protect against “fraud, waste, and abuse” and deliver funds in “equitable and accelerated ways.” In addition, he says it is critical to take the long view and invest in lasting projects that “don't fall apart in a few years,” when states need to secure sustained funding.

To achieve these goals, he observes that states will need to prioritize recruiting talented staff. He emphasizes that this will take “more than lawyers, scientists, and engineers,” but also communicators, community facilitators, and accountants, for example, who can effectively manage the funds.

A geographically diverse, bipartisan ECOS Infrastructure Workgroup is focusing on providing input to the federal government on how to make the best

use of congressional funding. ECOS is also establishing “a cross-cutting Climate and Energy Workgroup focused on continued integration of energy and climate policy

into core environmental programs.” Grumbles points out that many states now have dedicated staff who work on energy policy, some of whom are housed in environmental agencies.

He acknowledges that states vary in their climate mitigation goals and approaches, but he underscores that ECOS members agree that “collectively, states can find common ground” and provide “meaningful and impactful” comments to federal regulators, as well as share best practices. He singles out resilience and adaptation as a likely focus for the climate workgroup, noting the growing number of states that have hired chief resiliency officers.

Another ECOS priority is environ-

**A once-in-a-generation investment opportunity**

mental justice, because “how EJ is integrated into state programs is highly important.” Grumbles notes that although some approaches, such as new Title VI requirements in Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act permits, may not have uniform support among ECOS members, environmental justice is a “growing priority” for most. An ECOS Environmental Justice and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act Workgroup is currently focusing on facilitating discussions among state and federal partners.

Grumbles also identifies per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances as an ECOS priority. The ECOS PFAS Workgroup web page explains that “the increasingly complex landscape of federal and state activities is making it harder for each state to address its citizens' concerns about PFAS risks.” Consequently, the Workgroup is “helping states communicate and coordinate with EPA, other federal agencies, and each other about scientific and policy developments, newly identified sources and exposure pathways, and best practices for investigation, corrective action, and public engagement.” To this end, the ECOS fall meeting included a roundtable and a discussion on “New Directions in PFAS Risk Communication Amid Tightening Standards.”

Never short on enthusiasm, Grumbles says that he is “having a blast” and is committed to achieving “real progress with great urgency.” He will need that positive energy to navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for ECOS's chief executive.