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Two empty chairs sit inside Ahmanson Auditorium Feb. 4 at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Two scheduled conference panels on air quality and environmental justice were canceled after federal workers withdrew from participating due to the Trump administration's directives on diversity programs. (Cecilia González-Andrieu)



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Two empty chairs and soft music were all that filled Ahmanson Auditorium at Loyola Marymount University last week in what was supposed to be a panel discussion as part of its annual justice symposium.

A projector screen behind the chairs displayed why two sessions on air quality and environmental justice were canceled: An executive order from President Donald Trump cracking down on diversity initiatives led federal workers to back out of the conference at the Catholic school in Los Angeles.

The sudden withdrawal by employees with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Justice came amid the Trump administration blitz to stamp out diversity, equity and inclusion policies in government, and wider efforts to curtail environmental policies and scientific data as part of plans to dramatically shrink and reshape the federal workforce.

Offices and programs on environmental justice have been shuttered at EPA and the Justice Department, and staff have been put on leave. Meanwhile, references to "climate change" and scientific studies have been wiped from some government websites.

"What we are seeing right now is a government that wants to return us to an era of oppression and division and marginalization. And the attacks against environmental justice are meant to achieve just that," said Matthew Tejada, senior vice president of environmental health at the Natural Resources Defense Council and head of EPA's environmental justice program from 2013 to 2023.

> 'There's a great deal of fear in the federal workforce now about speaking out on anything.'
>
> —Peter Jenkins
>
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For 13 years, the symposium has been held at Loyola Marymount, which is sponsored by the Jesuits, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. The theme for this year's four-day conference in early February was "Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor: (Re)igniting the Voice of the Marginalized," based on a passage from Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

The notice that Loyola Marymount received about the federal employees' canceled participation in the Feb. 4 panels cited Trump's executive order directing federal departments to end DEI policies, which he called illegal.

The notice to Loyola Marymount also cited Trump's move to revoke a 1994 executive order under President Bill Clinton that required federal agencies to include environmental justice as part of their mission — including through research and data collection — and established an interagency working group on environmental justice.

Environmental justice refers to the principle that all people, regardless of race, color, origin or income, are entitled to equal environmental protections.

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Loyola Marymount spokeswoman Kristin Agostoni declined to provide additional information beyond the statement posted at the conference, including how many federal employees were expected to participate and who sent the notice.

"As with other universities across the country, LMU senior leaders are closely monitoring and analyzing recent executive and federal orders to determine their implications for the university's policies and campus environment and will provide updates as swiftly as possible," the displayed statement read.

The Justice Department did not respond to a request for comment. EPA spokeswoman Molly Vaseliou told EarthBeat in an email, "Following common

transition procedures, most major decisions have involved a pause."

"EPA is working diligently to implement President Trump's executive orders," she said.

Peter Jenkins, senior counsel with Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which supports current and former public employees working on environmental issues, said while it's normal for a new administration to put some work on hold, prohibiting civil servants from appearing at an academic event was unusual.

"It is common to direct staff not to put out major policy announcements, but I don't think it's common to prevent people from speaking at conferences," he told EarthBeat.

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Jenkins said the executive order targeting DEI policies is broad and vague enough to make many civil servants afraid to talk, regardless if their position is focused on DEI, or environmental justice.

"There's a great deal of fear in the federal workforce now about speaking out on anything," Jenkins said.

Trump administration targets EPA

The blocking of speakers at Loyola Marymount comes as the Trump administration has targeted EPA and climate programs in its early actions.

A gag order has been implemented at the EPA as well as other government agencies and departments, the news publication Government Executive reported Jan. 29. At the EPA, that has included a pause of communications with external entities.

The EPA has shuttered the Office of Environmental Justice, and 1,100 employees have been warned they could be fired at any time. Trump has floated the possibility of relocating EPA headquarters outside of D.C. He froze all Inflation Reduction Act spending — the nation's largest-ever investment in clean energy and climate change — and the Transportation Department has halted its electric vehicle charger program.

In addition, the words "climate change" and climate data and studies have been scrubbed from government websites, repeating efforts from Trump's first term, during which he dismantled more than 100 environmental rules.

The changes at the EPA are part of a broader effort to sow confusion toward shutting down the government in ways not seen before, Tejada said. He told EarthBeat that blocking federal workers from appearing at the Loyola Marymount conference "is one small but clear example of how that chaos and confusion is resulting in our government not serving the people."



An entrance for the United States Environmental Protection Agency in the William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building in Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons/G. Edward Johnson)

EPA employees approved a new union contract in 2024, partly motivated by the potential of Trump's return to the White House. It included new protections for scientific integrity against political interference and a provision to make it difficult to reclassify workers in a way that would strip protections. It also required the EPA to

establish DEI pilot programs.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility has filed a lawsuit over Trump's reclassification proposal (known as "Schedule F") and has advised workers on the blanket buyout offer for federal workers, which a federal judge froze Feb. 6. The organization is also monitoring changes at the Justice Department, where environmental lawyers have been reassigned.

Jenkins said restrictions on government officials and scientists publicly discussing their work will lead some to seek work elsewhere, and at the same time deprive federal offices of valuable information.

"You lose expertise on key questions that the government needs to tackle whether climate change or something as mundane as impacts of agricultural prices and statistics around that," he said.

Tejada said that "significant, meaningful strides" were made during his time at EPA on environmental justice. That coincided with President Joe Biden's Justice40 Initiative, which directed 40% of benefits from federal climate and energy programs to go toward historically disadvantaged communities. Trump has eliminated the initiative.

Smaller-scale symposium moves forward

Planning for the Loyola Marymount symposium began in late September. Starting with the 2024 conference, the university decided on the theme of ecological justice for the next several years as part of the school's commitment to the Laudato Si' Action Platform, a Vatican-led multiyear initiative for Catholic institutions to take tangible steps to respond to Francis' calls in *Laudato Si*' for greater concern and care for the Earth.



The 13th annual justice symposium at Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles, was focused on the theme of "Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor: (Re)igniting the Voice of the Marginalized," based on a passage from Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*'. (Cecilia González-Andrieu)

Despite the federal employees' withdrawals, the Loyola Marymount environmental symposium moved forward, though on a smaller scale.

Jesuit Fr. Barwendé Médard Sané, a researcher with Georgetown University's Environmental Justice Program, delivered the keynote address on the interconnected crises of environmental degradation and social inequality.

The wildfires that raged throughout Southern California last month drew added attention to the health impacts of poor air quality, a topic that Loyola Marymount researchers, especially through its Center for Urban Resilience, has studied for years, including the impact of poor air quality on marginalized communities and neighborhoods.

"This is usually a topic at the forefront of environmental concerns for those of us living in Los Angeles," said Michael McNaught, assistant director of the CSJ Center for Reconciliation and Justice at Loyola Marymount.

The Eaton Fire also led to the cancellation of another panel, on Feb. 5, that was focused on environmental justice efforts in LA, including campaigns to shut down two urban oil wells operated on land leased from the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

The final day of the symposium was also set to hold multiple sessions on Loyola Marymount's plan under the Laudato Si' Action Platform, but that too was postponed until later in the semester "due to the extraordinary events of recent weeks," according to the conference website.

The statement displayed at the canceled Feb. 4 session reinforced that Loyola Marymount "remain[s] committed to fostering an environment and discussions that reflect our values of academic freedom, the promotion of justice, and civil discourse."

Walking past the empty auditorium that day, Cecilia González-Andrieu, a theologian at Loyola Marymount, was nearly moved to tears, she said.

"Sometimes those who have been silenced speak truths that are much louder than words," González-Andrieu said.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.