



Representative Connie Bernardy  
Chair, Minnesota House Committee on Higher Education Finance and Policy  
563 State Office Building  
St. Paul, MN 55155  
March 28, 2022

Dear Members of the House Committee on Higher Education Finance and Policy,

The MN Environmental Justice Table, a community and grassroots-led alliance fighting for environmental justice, fair development, and self-determination in overburdened communities, support the passage of HF 4539. This bill is a straightforward approach to incentivizing, training, and protecting front line workers helping to carry out the University of Minnesota system's climate action and zero waste plans.

In December 2011, the University of Minnesota published its first [climate action plan](#), and has since made progress [reducing greenhouse gas emissions](#) through various initiatives. Similar to the Minnesota House Climate Action Caucus [plan](#) released in 2020, the University aims to be carbon neutral by 2050.

While these are admirable first steps, workers, students, and environmental justice groups in the community have begun raising awareness around critical gaps in the university's approach to addressing waste and climate change. Large amounts of the trash from the university's Twin Cities campus are being sent to the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC), where it is incinerated and contributes to air pollution in the surrounding overburdened communities. Trash incineration is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions; a [report](#) published by the Star Tribune last week named the HERC as the 31st largest greenhouse gas emitter in the state. The University of Minnesota - Twin Cities campus was named as the 29th largest, contributing 163,992 tons of CO2 emissions every year.

We are confident the Higher Education committee understands how much goes into carrying out big goals and how important adequate resources are at every level of implementation. There is evidently much more work to be done at the University of Minnesota, and it is undeniable that the university's ambitious goals cannot be reached without the support of the workers on campus—those who work in dining, in groundskeeping, and in maintenance. In fact, these very workers will be on the front lines of most initiatives to shrink the University system's carbon and waste footprints. As the workers themselves will tell you, without proper education, training, and incentivization, all the best laid plans will falter against the weight of inertia and understaffing.

Small changes can “add up,” but only if they are implemented correctly with the support and buy-in of all the relevant parties. If Facilities Management is so understaffed that custodians are



forced to choose between sorting recycling and removing waste; or the dining workers are not trained to distinguish between compostable and recyclable waste; or maintenance workers see no value in implementing a newer greener way of doing things, then all the goals laid out won't amount to any real change. How can the University expect to see the proposed rewards of its Climate Action and waste reduction plans if the workers on the ground are not invested in its sustainability goals?

HF 4539 aligns the goals of the University and the needs of thousands of Minnesotan working families employed on its campuses. With the vital resources included in HF 4539 the University and the workers can achieve the ambitious goals laid out in the Climate Action Plan. We urge this committee to advance this commonsense legislation.

Sincerely,

Nazir Khan &  
Krystle D'Alencar,  
on behalf of the  
Minnesota Environmental Justice Table