

# Natural Resources Defense Council's Roadmap to Net Positive Sustainable Operations Plan FY17-21

Winter 2016 – 2017

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NRDC Operational Impact Plan\_2021



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## OUR MISSION & VISION

### Organization Level – NRDC’s Mission Statement

“NRDC works to safeguard the earth—its people, its plants and animals, and the natural systems on which all life depends.”

### Operational Level – Facilities’ Vision Statement

“Through superior stewardship our facilities foster a collaborative and inclusive workplace. By prioritizing the planet we will continue to inspire our community to strive for the highest level of environmental standards and a sustainable future.”

## INTRODUCTION

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is comprised of some of the world's most passionate advocates. Each of them embody our mission and spirit daily and are building a better shared future. The physical spaces where NRDC staff work match that conviction to *not only protect but to restore our natural environment across the globe*.

What sets NRDC's operations apart from our peers is our deep focus on the triple bottom line of sustainability. In addition to the health and well-being of the environment, this includes sustainability of people and finances. The NRDC Facilities Team's creation and operation of our offices is inextricably linked to the successes that we are known for. Our commitment to safeguarding and restoring the earth can be seen in each architectural detail, system design and the way we operate our spaces. Details of our offices that can be seen, and those that cannot, tell our stories and our ideals as human beings, as co-workers, and as an organization on the forefront of ensuring that everyone has clean air, clean water and healthy communities. The Facilities Team is setting a new bar for the environmental sustainability and resilience of our buildings and operations, which are physical manifestations of NRDC's values. We exemplify excellence that challenges the industry and inspires others to follow our lead.

### *The sustainable operations plan*

Enclosed is the latest iteration of the strategic sustainable operations plan for NRDC. It takes into consideration our environmental impact, which we define as the sum of results caused by NRDC's actions on the planet, its people – including NRDC staff – and its animals. The goals within build upon the prior plan created in early 2012. That plan set forth projects – divided into three deliberate phases – for reducing NRDC's environmental impact over fiscal years 2012 through 2014 (July 2011 through June 2014). The results can be seen at the end of this document. The 2012 plan was significantly successful in implementing various projects that reduced NRDC's building emissions by close to half. In this next stage we are setting forth goals for fiscal years 2017 through 2021 (July 2016 through June 2021). In this longer timeframe we are able to set short, medium and long term goals in a framework that facilitates our ultimate vision: to become a net positive organization. We are going beyond reducing our negative impact to create measurable positive impacts in the world.

This plan integrates environmental goals with the other priorities held by the NRDC's Facilities Team. We are not looking to isolate environmental sustainability as a concept but rather make it foundational to the way we are operating. We believe there is no other way of doing it.

### *A note on the word 'sustainability'*

The NRDC Facilities Team is intentionally reducing our use of the word 'sustainability' in favor of terms that more accurately capture what the impact category or metric is. 'Sustainability' has become a catch-all phrase for anything related to the planet and we are becoming more selective with its use. However, we will not eliminate it from our lexicon. It is still currently a relevant and relatable word to many of our stakeholders and those we aim to reach. There is no succinct replacement that sufficiently captures everything that NRDC is trying to accomplish to improve planetary and human well-being. Rather, we search for a more specific word if one is available and continue to use 'sustainability' when it is most appropriate.

## SCOPE

As a mission-driven organization, our negative impact on the planet – what we extract from the earth and the damage we cause to nature’s systems – stems from the operations of our offices and our movement around the globe to do and share our work. The focus of this plan is to reduce that impact and create parallel positive outcomes outside of our physical spaces. NRDC is structured into programmatic and operational teams. The author behind this plan is the Facilities Team, which is part of the organization’s operations staff. Our primary function is to efficiently operate our offices, to support staff in the physical spaces where they perform their job functions and to do so in an exemplary manner.



NRDC’s Ecosystem



## HISTORY OF NRDC'S FACILITIES

NRDC has a long history of leading the industry with our environmentally conscious operations. The organization was founded in 1970 and as soon as it had grown large enough to warrant a real office and a designated Facilities team, NRDC started cultivating an approach to low impact design and operations.

### *Timeline of our biggest accomplishments in our building spaces*

- 1980s** Preceding the existence of any green building certification, the **New York headquarters** was built to a framework that parallels LEED today.
- 2001** The **Santa Monica** office, a renovated massage school, became one of the first and highest rated Platinum level LEED for New Construction project under LEED v2.
- 2004** The **San Francisco** office achieves LEED for Commercial Interiors v1 Gold rating.
- NRDC started purchasing carbon allowances to offset our operational greenhouse gas impact across all offices.
- Santa Monica installs solar panels and a greywater system.
- 2008** The 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the **New York headquarters** achieves the highest rated Platinum level certification at the time (51 of 59 points) under LEED for Commercial Interiors v2009.
- 2011** The **Washington DC** office achieves LEED for Commercial Interiors v2009 Platinum certification in the top 10th percentile.
- 2013** The **Beijing** office achieves LEED for Commercial Interiors v2009 Gold Certification.
- An NRDC office achieved two certifications for the first time in our **Chicago** office. It was awarded LEED for Commercial Interiors v2009 Platinum and Living Building Challenge (LBC) v2.1 Petal Certification, the first TI in the world to achieve LBC recognition.
- Heating oil in New York is switched to biodiesel.
- 2014** The moved and renovated **Beijing** office achieves both LEED for Commercial Interiors v2009 Gold certification and Living Building Challenge v2.1 Petal Certification, the first LBC project in China.
- New York's air barrier was sealed to close the equivalent of a 10 foot hole in the building envelope.
- 2015** New York starts purchasing off-site renewable electricity through an ESCO called Ethical Electric, effectively making the office net zero.
- 2016** The expansion of the **Chicago** office is designed to achieve LEED for Commercial Interiors v4 Gold status and became the first project to achieve Petal Certification with the Materials Petal under the 3.0 version of the Living Building Challenge.
- The **San Francisco** office renovation is designed to Living Building v3.1 Challenge Petal Certification and LEED for Commercial Interiors v4 Gold.

The strategic plan outlined in this document is a continuation of our dedication to being at the forefront of change. We continually challenge what is thought of as impossible and lead the charge towards harmonizing our actions with the planet, both within and beyond our walls. In [NRDC's 2015 Annual Report](#), NRDC states that global carbon emissions must be cut by 80% by 2050. This plan demonstrates how NRDC is working towards that goal and developing a strategy to meet and exceed that target in the future.

We see our offices as both physical spaces and change agents.

## OUR MOTIVATION

We are at a critical point in our planet and our organization's history. The science is proving that the planet is rapidly changing and increasingly affecting the safety and well-being of humans and the natural systems that surround us. At NRDC, we too are adapting our strategies both in our program work and how we operate on a daily basis.

While our leadership strategizes at an organizational level, the Facilities team takes the opportunity to look at the coming years and determine where we have the power to shape NRDC's physical environmental footprint, including our impact on human health. We are at a pivotal junction to take huge leaps towards reframing our relationship to the planet. This strategic plan outlines how we do that in the most effective and groundbreaking manner.

As a team we aim to...

*Provide the best quality office spaces for NRDC staff.*

Our work as an organization is only as strong as the people that are a part of it. To be as effective as possible, all building occupants need to feel their best. Our strategies optimize the health of our staff, create spaces conducive to high professional performance and allow for the space to enhance mental and emotional well-being.

*Minimize humanity's impact on the planet.*

NRDC's mission is to safeguard the earth. Our offices are designed to support that by operating efficiently and with the cleanest energy that we can source. Our guiding light is the philosophy that buildings should act harmoniously with nature and as a part of an ecosystem. All of our major offices are intentionally located in dense urban areas in order to minimize our footprint. We take advantage of existing infrastructure and our staff rely on public transportation to get to work and to and from meetings. That's just the beginning.

*Shape the building industry.*

NRDC has always followed – and helped shape – the most progressive environmental practices when it comes to construction and operations. We look to pioneers in the industry for inspiration and challenge ourselves to be innovative. Our ultimate goal is to find solutions that are scalable. We use NRDC's spaces to test, prove and strengthen the concepts that our colleagues on the program side study and advocate for.



## LOOKING FORWARD – OUR GOALS & IMPLEMENTATION

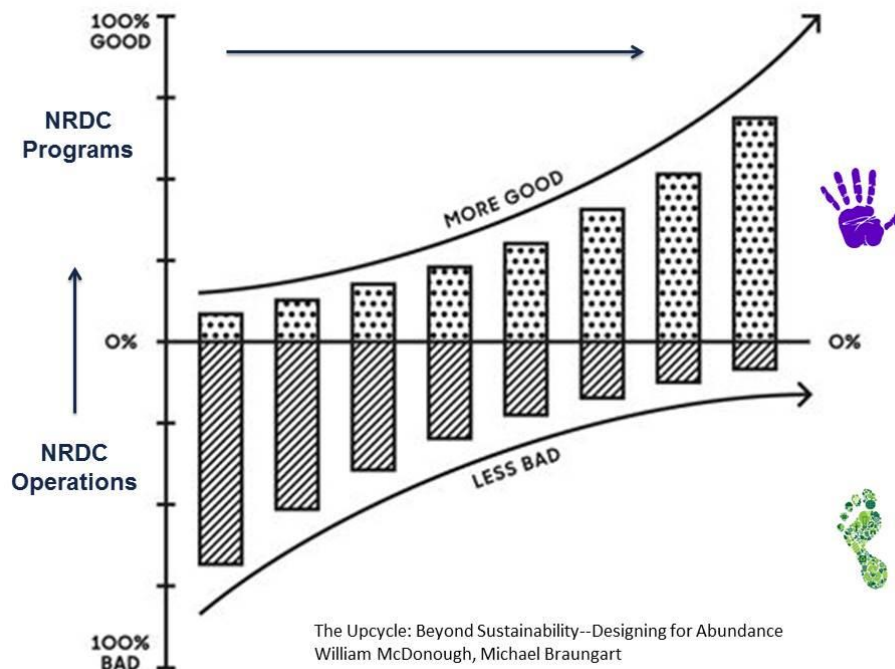
NRDC strives to create a net positive or regenerative, real estate portfolio by 2020, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NRDC as an organization. This means that we will reduce the net creation of carbon emissions derived from our building operational activity to zero, use less water from municipal sources, send virtually no waste to the landfill and inspire and guide others to do the same. It will be challenging to shrink our overall footprint to zero, but by minimizing our footprint and maximizing our handprint, we strive to become net positive overall.



*Handprints* are defined as the positive impacts we cause to happen relative to “business as usual.”

To become net positive we must give more than we take from the natural environment. NRDC’s steps to becoming net positive include: 1 – reducing our footprint, 2 – helping others reduce their footprint, and 3 – creating positive actions outside of our footprint. If we simply aimed to get to zero we would be restraining the good we do by the harm we are already causing. Instead, we aim to go beyond footprint reduction and maximize our “handprints” or positive impact we have in the world.

This strategic plan is designed to be executed over the next five fiscal years (FY17 through FY21). We have 13 operational goals related to the environment and our staff members that are listed in general order of priority over the 5 year timeline. They are organized into categories of those that reduce our footprint and those that grow our handprint. Within those two categories we have goals that are focused internally, within NRDC’s walls, and externally, using our real estate portfolio as a change agent. While we aim to transform and educate, the plan is designed with a focus on strengthening our base first to fuel our expertise.



**Figure 1: Net Positive Framework.** Currently, NRDC operates under the premise that our program work creates positive impacts while the operations side reduces the negative ones. NRDC is switching to the paradigm that our operations can have an effect that parallels our programs. We are reducing our negative impact and causing a positive one simultaneously.

## Measuring Net Positive

As of the creation of this plan, there are multiple ways to conceptualize net positive and no official standard for quantifying the concept of net positive exists. NRDC will adopt standards as they are created – such as the one being developed by the NETPositive Initiative – if they fall in line with our goals. However, net positive cannot be discussed without considering the three branches of triple bottom line. For the purpose of this plan, we are considering the following, measured with the key performance indicators (KPIs) identified:

- **Environmental impact:** The net sum of carbon emissions, water use & waste production.
  - KPI: NRDC will hit a point at which our actions result in more energy created from renewable sources than fossil sources. Our water practices will result in restoration and we will divert all of our waste from the landfill.
- **Economic impact:** A scalable return on investment (ROI) for all sustainability initiatives.
  - KPI: ROI should be in an acceptable timeframe for most building owners. Initiatives will be financially accessible & scalable for those of various financial backgrounds
- **Social impact:** Transparency and a raised awareness that compels to action.
  - KPI: Initiatives taken on by external communities that can be contributed to NRDC's direct action will qualify as our positive impact.

## Methodology

A series of projects are associated with each goal. The goals and associated projects are both **qualitative and quantitative**, they are approached in a **systems thinking manner** and seek to eliminate trade-offs by **prioritizing both economics and ecology**. We aim to be cost effective by maximizing our resources and our mission.

## Sustainable Operations Goals

**Goal 1:** Eliminate **greenhouse gas emissions** due to NRDC facilities' energy use by reducing consumption and increasing share of renewable sources.

**Goal 2:** Minimize **water supply** to NRDC facilities from municipal sources. For owned offices, operate within a closed loop water system from water collected on site.

**Goal 3:** Minimize **material waste** generated at NRDC facilities and eliminate waste sent to the landfill and incinerators.

**Goal 4:** Rid NRDC facilities of **indoor environmental factors** that have an adverse effect on human health and productivity as well as the planet.

**Goal 5:** Refine a process for **measuring and tracking** towards goals 1-3.

**Goal 6:** Create and implement **construction and operational protocols** that support progress towards goals 1 – 4.

**Goal 7:** Strengthen **procurement policies** for all NRDC facilities-related purchases to ensure that our consumer power is supporting goals 1-4.

**Goal 8:** Reduce the scope 3 greenhouse gas impact from NRDC **staff travel** due to NRDC activities.

**Goal 9: Educate NRDC Facilities Team** on the initiatives in this plan and their importance.

**Goal 10: Educate all NRDC staff** on the initiatives in this plan and their importance.

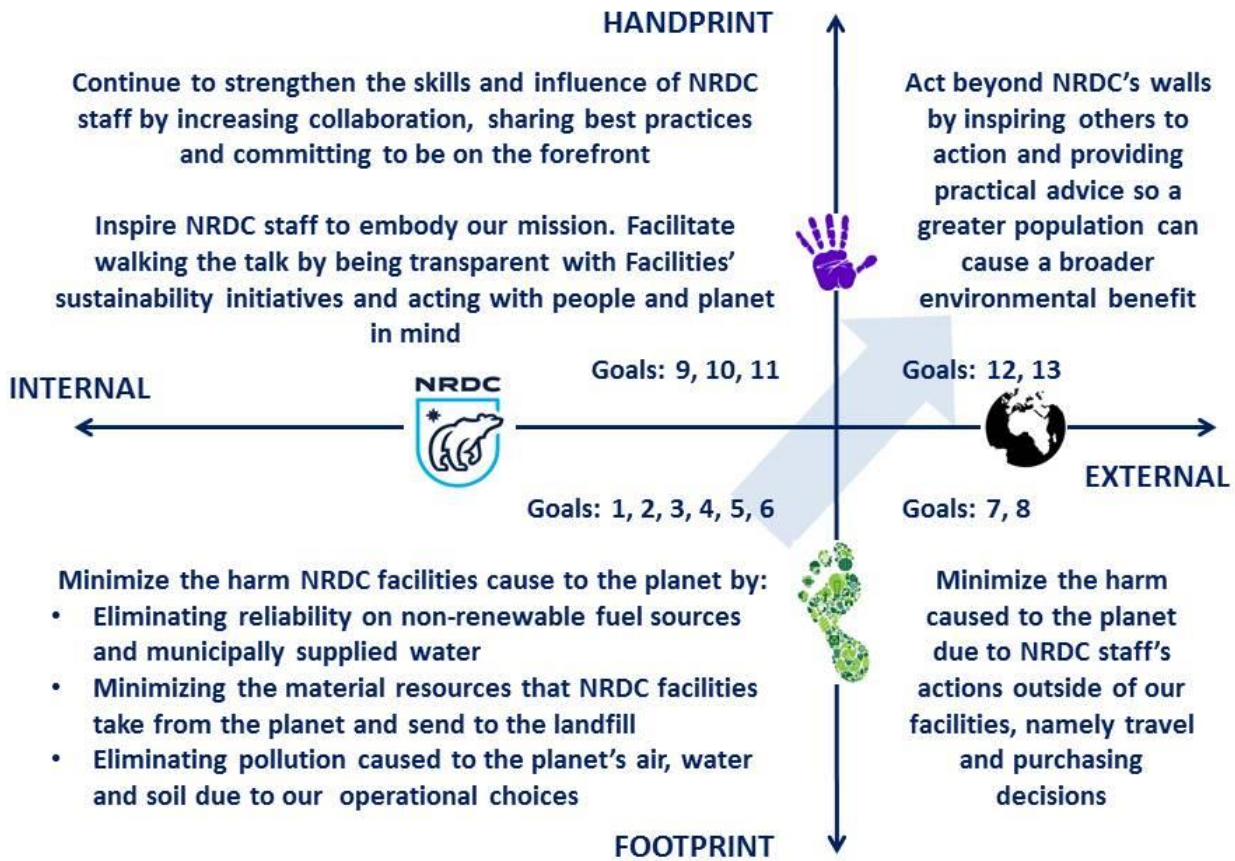
**Goal 11: Collaborate** across NRDC administration and program staff on projects to strengthen the work that all NRDC staff do.

**Goal 12:** Build an external presence in appropriate industries to **build community and inspire** parties beyond NRDC's walls to action.

**Goal 13:** Provide **actionable advice** to external parties through free services and paid consultancy.

## The Projects

All projects and goals fall into this framework.



**Figure 2: NRDC Sustainability Goals Matrix.** All 13 goals can be divided into quadrants of a matrix that considers our footprint and handprint within the internal NRDC context and the greater external world. Most of our goals fall within the bottom left quadrant that addresses our internal footprint because we have to reduce our own impact before we can help others do it.

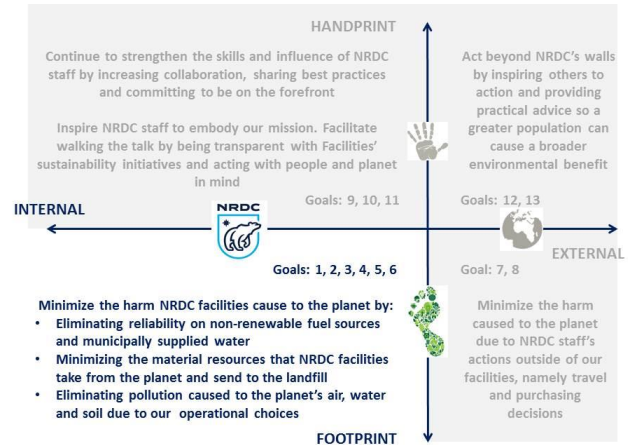
## All Quadrants

We have one overarching project that applies to all goals and all quadrants of the framework and that is our *funding project*:

- Actively seek external sources of funding such as grants and donations.

## Internal / Footprint

The plan starts in the bottom left quadrant of our framework. We are starting in-house and within the space where we have the most control and the most to learn. We will understand our own impact on the planet and implement initiatives that are smart and scalable. Our impact includes causing greenhouse gases to enter the atmosphere, depleting water and polluting.



### **Goal 1: Eliminate greenhouse gas emissions due to NRDC facilities' energy use by reducing consumption and increasing share of renewable sources.**

The primary source of our building greenhouse gas emissions is the energy we use to power our offices. We take into consideration scope 1, 2 and partial scope 3 emissions. This encompasses the fuel we burn on site for heating, the energy that we consume from the utility grid electricity, the transmission losses from delivering energy to our sites and district heating for our Beijing office. We are tackling emissions from both sides; first reducing our demand as much as possible through strategic energy efficiency projects and then looking for ways to supply our remaining energy demand from renewable sources.

### **Goal 2: Minimize water supply from municipal sources in NRDC facilities. For owned offices, operate within a closed loop water system from water collected on site.**

Depending on the office location, the use of water in our buildings – for bathrooms, kitchens and building process water – causes varying levels of stress on the local ecosystems. In our California offices, where there is a fluctuating state of drought, it is especially important that staff consume as little water as possible to avoid starving the natural systems of it. But in all offices, the delivery and treatment of water comes with the cost of pollution and overwhelming the infrastructure. Combined sewer overflows, which pollute waterways, are common when waste water treatment plants cannot accept the volume of building sewer water and rain runoff. Wastewater treatment plants also consume electricity. At NRDC, we are first reducing the amount of water we use and then looking at ways to change how it's brought to us. Water is an impact area that we do not know as much as we could. One of our primary objectives will be to learn more.

### **Goal 3: Minimize material waste generated at NRDC facilities and eliminate waste sent to the landfill.**

NRDC Operational Impact Plan\_2021

The common phrase “throwing \_\_\_\_\_ away” is misleading because there is no such thing as ‘away’. At NRDC, we are looking to eliminate that disconnect. We define our waste impact as the amount of material generated by NRDC employees while at work that is sent to a landfill or otherwise pollutes. We are both increasing our landfill diversion rate and reducing the amount of all types of materials that needs to be disposed of. More so than energy and water, our waste impact is dependent on human behavior. Therefore, staff collaboration and participation is especially crucial in goal 3. We are enlisting in house experts and relying on the support of all staff to reach our goals.

**Goal 4: Rid NRDC facilities of indoor environmental factors that have an adverse effect on human health and productivity as well as the planet.**

The negative effects of poor indoor air quality on humans range from physiological ailments to cognitive disruptions. They can harm health and productivity. Indoor pollutants are often symptoms of outdoor ones, which hurt the planet. Yet the presence of poor air quality is not always considered a primary sustainability topic because, except for smog, it is invisible. At NRDC, we are doing everything we can to prevent and eradicate all air pollutants. We are even improving the emotional relationship to the indoor environment by introducing elements of nature into our offices.

**Goal 5: Refine a process for measuring and tracking towards goals 1-4.**

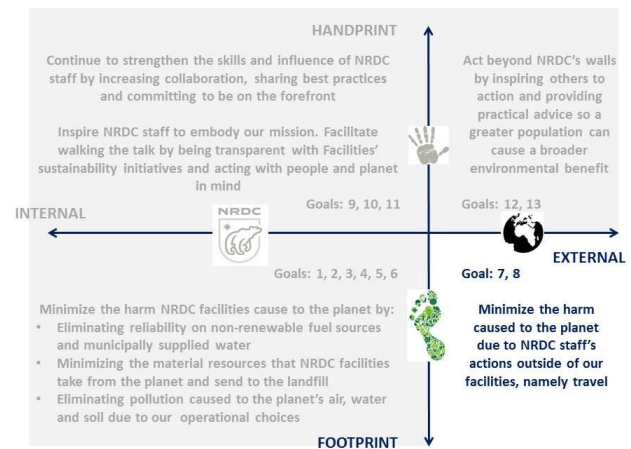
The first step towards measuring the success of our footprint goals is being aware of what our footprint is at any time. We can’t fix what we don’t know. NRDC already collects extensive data on our operations through real time monitoring of energy and water consumption and daily waste weigh-ins. With goal 5, we aim to ensure that our data is always well organized and informing our decision making. We are streamlining our methods to track our trends and taking corrective measures as we go.

**Goal 6: Choose and implement construction and operational protocols that support progress towards goals 1 – 4.**

In addition to the day to day, the Facilities team manages capital improvement projects in NRDC offices. That includes periodic fixes of existing spaces and complete renovations of offices when the need arises. Environmental building rating systems exist to encourage building professionals to consider the planetary impact of their projects. In our construction projects, we espouse the principles that are promoted by those rating systems and pursue the certifications that verify we are meeting our goals.

## External / Footprint

All of our actions and decisions are inextricably linked to subsequent reactions, the results of which might not be immediately visible. For NRDC, the biggest example of that is our purchasing of both goods and travel. This next section contains goals related to thinking about the ripple effect of every purchase made by NRDC and how to reduce the negative environmental outcomes of those decisions.



### Goal 7: Strengthen procurement policies for all NRDC facilities-related purchases to ensure that our consumer power is supporting goals 1-4.

The products that NRDC purchases for use in our offices include consumer goods that stock our kitchens, bathrooms and mailrooms, the technology that enables us to work and the building materials that create our spaces. Each of those goods have implications related to emissions, water, waste, air quality, pollution and social justice. With increased transparency in the consumer world, we are empowered to make educated purchases and support our values with our dollars. We are striving to make NRDC's purchases stand what we believe in.

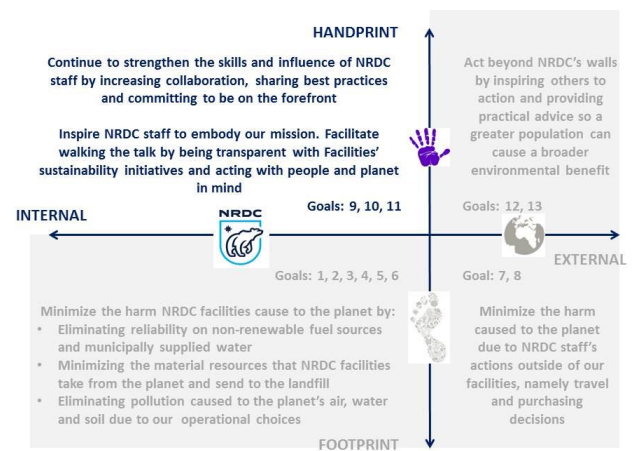
### Goal 8: Reduce the scope 2 greenhouse gas impact from NRDC staff travel due to NRDC activities.

Undeniably, NRDC's largest environmental impact is due to our travel. The transportation sector accounts for over a quarter of the United States' greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>1</sup> Our travel is a controversial and complex challenge to break down because it is due to our staff's ability to move around the world that we are so effective on a broad scale. Still, we know we can do a better job of maximizing effect while minimizing greenhouse gases and cost associated with reaching our audience.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions>

## Internal / Handprint

As our footprint heads towards zero, we are ramping up our handprint. To do more good, our sustainability work cannot rely on just one person or one team within NRDC. This is especially true for us because the focus of our program staff is to make environmental and social improvements happen beyond our walls. Our colleagues are a crucial resource for making Facilities' goals more powerful. Through cross-pollination, we inform program work, ultimately strengthening NRDC's mission. While these goals span the axis between our footprint and handprint, their primary nature is to provide our initiatives with a larger reach rather than be instrumental in reducing our footprint.



### Goal 9: Educate NRDC Facilities Team on the initiatives in this plan and their importance.

Internal operational sustainability is a team effort; it affects the jobs of every Facilities staff member. The Facilities team is changing processes and protocols to incorporate environmental objectives. Without acceptance and adoption by all of us, this plan would fail. The ultimate benefit is that the team's way of thinking is transformed. The team continuously proposes new, innovative ideas.

### Goal 10: Educate all NRDC staff on the initiatives in this plan and their importance.

Staff participation is crucial to many of our initiatives because they are partially dependent on staff's behavior. We believe that by informing our staff, including volunteers, on how the space they occupy is different from a typical office space, they will take ownership of caring for it the way the Facilities team does. Since many of our initiatives directly protect their health and productivity, we aim to foster an open dialogue so we can learn from staff as well. We aim to engage Program Assistant's in particular because of their enthusiasm and unique knowledge of how the organization runs.

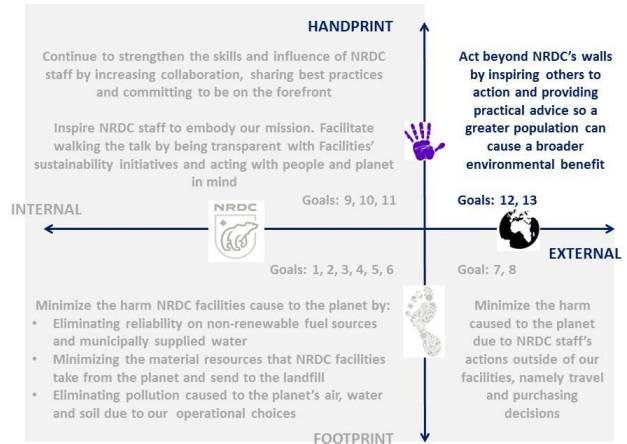
### Goal 11: Collaborate across NRDC administration and program staff on projects to strengthen the work that all NRDC staff do.

The Facilities and program staff are often working towards the same goals with complimentary skills. In order to benefit from those skills, we need to collaborate and seek advice across groups within NRDC. Several external NRDC initiatives already have both program and administrative staff working together. Facilities team members will continue to improve the infrastructure that enables us to collaborate with each other and look for opportunities to strengthen our work by enlisting the help of program staff.



## External / Handprint

The protection of our planet relies on all of humanity. That is at the center of NRDC's mission and why we are an advocacy organization. While the operations side is not specifically intended to do advocacy work, we embrace that value. To be truly effective, we need to reach beyond our walls. The Facilities' team also has the opportunity to advocate for a better planet to our peers while meeting our core job functions. We also believe in scalability – it is a central metric of success for our projects. As a non-profit, NRDC is obligated to be responsible with our resources. Our goal is to discover methods that are not only cost effective for NRDC but for others so that they are more widely adopted.



### **Goal 12: Build an external presence in appropriate industries to build community and inspire parties beyond NRDC's walls to action.**

NRDC has a positive reputation in the green building industry because we are a leader in adopting the LEED and Living Building Challenge rating systems. We want to continue that and grow into industries beyond the green building market to increase our reach. Our outreach strategy for goal 12 is twofold: attending and hosting events and increasing media and external communications presence. Success for this goal is achieved if external parties are inspired by NRDC's actions enough to emulate them.

### **Goal 13: Provide actionable advice to external parties through free services and paid consultancy.**

A result of NRDC Facilities always being on the forefront is that the team has honed very specialized skills. We are motivated – by NRDC's advocacy value – to share the unique knowledge that we have. One way we aim to continue doing that is through direct advice to external parties that want to partner with us. Through both free advice and paid consultancy work, we will scale up our initiatives.

## SUSTAINABLE OPERATIONS PROGRESS

### FY12 – 14 Sustainable Operations Progress Report

In 2012, we published a strategic plan for fiscal years 2012 through 2014. In the four and a half years since then, we've made great strides, re-routed along the way and made note of what projects were better to tackle at a future date. This fiscal year 2017 through 2021 plan builds on the previous plan. It recognizes that our activities and impacts are ever adapting with the changes in both internal (budget, resources, institutional and team focus) and external (technology, climate change, stresses due to environmental changes) factors. Relevant projects from the previous plan are adopted and changed within this plan.

#### *FY12-14 Achievements Summary*









- Completed 18 of 23 projects
- Accomplished most of the FY12 projects and partially completed most of FY13 and FY14 projects. Many of the projects are ongoing because we've found ways to continually improve them.
- Since 2012, we reduced our GHGs by 42%

#### *FY12-14 Projects Recap with Status*

\*Blue highlighted projects are still being worked on. They are a part of a continual plan or were not completed during the FY12-14 time period due to various reasons.

## EMISSIONS AND CONSUMPTION TRENDS SINCE FY12

The numbers are proof that our efforts are making a difference. We've grown in both number of employees and square footage in the past 5 years, yet we've consistently decreased our impact in nearly all metrics.

NRDC Environmental Metrics Progress, FY12 - FY16						
				more reliable data collection process in place →		Change from first measure to FY16
	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	
 Size (rsf)	133,978	133,978	139,465	141,603	142,980	7%
 Building Emissions (tons CO2e)*	690	676	632	628	402	-42%
 Electricity Consumption (MWh)	1,472	1,408	1,459	1,466	1,295	-12%
 Heat Consumption (MWh)	754	793	816	722	547	-27%
 Portion of Energy that is renewable (%)	0.7%	0.7%	13%	13%	37%	36%
 Water Consumption (thousand gallons)	-	-	1,626	1,283	1,227	-25%
 Waste & Recycling (kg)	-	-	20,005	21,929	24,215	21%
 Waste & Recycling (% diverted from landfill)	-	-	72%	70%	73%	1%

\*includes scope 1 heat, 2 electricity, 3 transmission & distribution losses, Beijing heat

**Figure 3: NRDC Environmental Metrics Progress, FY12-16.** NRDC performs detailed calculations every fiscal year to determine our impact across various environmental metrics. This shows our progress over the past 5 fiscal years.

## NEXT STEPS

To have all our impact above the x-axis, in the handprint territory, we have a lot of work to do. The progression of technology, policy, urgency and mindset in the past 5 years leaves us confident that we can reach our goals.

Over the next 5 years, we will reference this plan and the associated live project list often. It will guide the Facilities team's projects. We are prepared to make changes along the way and to add to it.

Here is where we're starting. We are first referencing our data to see where our largest impacts exist and tackle them first. Along the way we are expanding our knowledge and checking our approaches with multiple experts. With large projects and a few smaller, complimentary initiatives, we are well on our way to achieving the following in the next couple of years:

- Santa Monica net zero
- New York net zero
- Chicago net zero
- New York water reduction
- DC wellness improvements
- Public display of our real time consumption data

We've already hitting the pavement running.