

GNOICC Declaration in Support of UN March 2021 Statement in Opposition to Formosa Plastics Plant Permit Application (St. James Parish) and Call for Environmental Justice in Louisiana and U.S.

The Greater New Orleans Interfaith Climate Coalition (GNOICC) acts as a catalyst to educate, empower, engage and equip faith leaders and communities to meet our moral, ethical, and spiritual responsibility to establish climate justice and promote care of the Earth and all that dwell on it, in order to create a healthy world from the perspectives of faith and reason. All of our work is suffused with a deep and abiding reverence for the sacredness of Nature.

On March 2, 2021, the UN Human Rights Council issued a statement calling for a halt to further petrochemical complex development along the lower Mississippi River corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. It also called for “the United States and St. James Parish to recognise and pay reparations for the centuries of harm to Afro-descendants rooted in slavery and colonialism.”

The UN experts identified the proposed Formosa Plastics Group’s FG LA LLC petrochemical complex as the latest example of a “form of environmental racism [that] poses serious and disproportionate threats to the enjoyment of several human rights of its largely African American residents, including the right to equality and non-discrimination, the right to life, the right to health, [and the] right to an adequate standard of living and cultural rights.”

The UN experts noted that:

- The proposed Formosa Plastics plant – by itself – will more than double the excess cancer risk in St. James Parish and, as shown by US EPA’s Air Toxics Assessment Maps, the excess cancer risk in that parish could reach 104-105 per million residents of color, while predominantly white communities could have excess cancer risks of 60-75 per million, while the combined carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) emissions in one parish could exceed the total of 113 other countries;
- At least four (4) ancestral burial grounds of enslaved Africans would be destroyed by the construction of the Formosa Plastics plant;
- US federal government regulations have failed to protect people residing in “Cancer Alley;”
- President Biden’s January 20 Executive Order, on “Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis,” and the pledge to listen to science, strengthen clean air and water protections, and hold polluters accountable for their actions, must result in the US Government’s delivery of environmental justice in communities across America, starting with St James Parish.

The UN experts concluded: “Corporations also bear responsibility and should conduct environmental and human rights impact assessments as part of the due diligence process.”

The Greater New Orleans Interfaith Climate Coalition (www.gnoicc.org) applauds the UN statement for its timing in connection with the Formosa Plastics permit application, its acknowledgment of the history of environmental racism in the U.S., and its recognition that federal regulatory agencies have failed to protect the people living in and around Cancer Alley. GNOICC also applauds the UN statement for its reference to President Biden’s Executive

Order that speaks directly and forcefully to the imperative of restoring health and environmental justice to those vulnerable communities.

President Biden's Executive Order 13990 sets out several policies that every federal executive department and agency must adopt and promote. EO 13990 promises to "hold polluters accountable, including those who disproportionately harm communities of color and low-income communities," "to bolster resilience to the impacts of climate change," and "to prioritize both environmental justice and the creation of the well-paying union jobs necessary to deliver on those goals."

As Americans from the state of Louisiana, we are intimately familiar with the reasons why the UN experts identified "Cancer Alley" and the Formosa Plastics plant as the most flagrant examples of environmental racism and failed public health and environmental regulatory enforcement, and we are mindful that the frontline communities who live along this corridor also refer to it as "Death Alley," because cancer is not the only fatal illness that is caused by exposure to the industrial toxic wastes there.

- We know that, in addition to the unacceptable risks posed by the Formosa Plastics plant in St. James Parish, St. John the Baptist Parish has the highest excess cancer risk of any county in the *entire country* (at 413 in 1 million), primarily due to chloroprene emissions from the Denka Performance Elastomer plant and ethylene oxide emissions from the Evonik Materials Corp. and Union Carbide plants. St John Parish and other Cancer Alley residents are also exposed to "hot spots" of dangerous levels of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) around large petrochemical facilities. For example, 13 large facilities located directly upwind of St. John neighborhoods emit a combined total of more than 1600 tons of PM2.5 every year.
- We know that the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) has known for more than 5 years about high asthma rates and cancer risks facing school children as well as adults in St. John the Baptist and other Cancer Alley parishes, the extremely high COVID-19 death rates in these same parishes, and the existence of 3 independent scientific studies showing correlations between COVID-19 infection and death rates and the high rates of exposure to PM 2.5 particulates and air toxics like chloroprene and ethylene oxide.
- We know that LDH has *never* conducted an epidemiological study of air pollution-related health effects in any Cancer Alley parish, despite having access to local public health data showing extremely elevated rates of premature death, asthma, heart disease, lung cancer, and other severe illnesses in those communities, as well as the data showing nearly constant exposure to unconscionably high levels of air toxics and PM 2.5.
- We know that, despite having the highest air toxics cancer risk in the nation, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality's (LDEQ) air toxics regulations are some of the nation's most lenient. For example, LDEQ's benzene standard is more than twice as lenient as the Texas standard, which is over 30 times more lenient than that of Massachusetts.
- We know that, as unconscionable as these conditions are in Cancer Alley, they are not unprecedented; they also exist in and around Lake Charles, and other parts of our state.
- And we know that LDEQ, as well as LDH, has failed to fulfill its statutory mandate by enforcing aggressively, or at all, air toxics and other anti-pollution laws against the businesses whose production process by-products poison our air, water, and soils, sicken and kill us prematurely, and render our very homes unfit to live in. A 2021 Louisiana Legislative Auditor Report found that emissions violations at some facilities were allowed to continue uncorrected for as long as 8.8 years.

- And so, we join with our interfaith and secular environmental and social justice colleagues and organizations to demand a halt to the history and practice of environmental racism in Louisiana, starting now, with the denial of Formosa Plastics' FG LA LLC's petrochemical plant application in St. James Parish.

We demand that multibillion dollar foreign and domestic petrochemical corporations NOT be encouraged to do business in Louisiana by getting hundreds of millions of dollars in tax breaks that deprive the communities in which they're located of critically needed revenue to fund schools, libraries, roads, hospitals, and other public services.

We demand that multibillion dollar foreign and domestic petrochemical corporations be REQUIRED to clean up the air, water, and soils their existing facilities have contaminated and that have disproportionately sickened and killed residents of color, indigenous people, and low-income residents.

We demand that multibillion dollar foreign and domestic petrochemical corporations be HELD PUBLICLY ACCOUNTABLE for their contamination by the enactment and consistent enforcement of tougher environmental and public health laws, regulations, and facility permit conditions.

And we demand that a statewide commission be created to establish standards and processes for the delivery of reparations to communities of color, low-income communities, and indigenous peoples whose land has been lost and health damaged by historic and ongoing environmental racism.

We and our environmental justice colleagues ask LDEQ and LDH to enter into a working and cooperative relationship with us. We want to learn from LDEQ and LDH, through regular meetings with each other, how they plan to address the ongoing threats to our health and our land, air, and water, consistent with their statutory mandates to protect all of Louisiana's residents. We want them to understand that our devotion to healthy communities and the elimination of environmental racism are spiritual and existential values that are deeply rooted in our diverse faith traditions.

We know that LDEQ and LDH understand that the relationship between a healthy economy and environmental protection and public health is not a zero-sum game, that it is not only possible but equitable and essential for Louisiana's economy to thrive without poisoning its residents along with the air, water, and lands that all of us share.

Submitted by Jonathan Sebastian Leo on behalf of the Greater New Orleans Interfaith Climate Coalition