

Community Contacts

Robert Taylor, Executive Director
Concerned Citizens of St. John the Baptist Parish
504-559-7304

Mary Hampton, President
Concerned Citizens of St. John the Baptist Parish
985-210-1976

Legal Contact

Devin Lowell, Esq.
Tulane Environmental Law Clinic
504-862-8814 | dlowell@tulane.edu

Science Contact

Kimberly Terrell, Ph.D.
Director of Community Engagement
Tulane Environmental Law Clinic
504-865-5787 | kterrell1@tulane.edu

PRESS RELEASE

St. John citizens file emergency request with Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to stop toxic emissions that pose extreme cancer risk.

New Orleans, May 12, 2021: After numerous failed attempts to get U.S. state and federal agencies to intervene on decades of exposure to extremely toxic levels of cancer-causing pollution, the Concerned Citizens of St. John the Baptist Parish are appealing to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights for help. The Commission investigates alleged human rights abuses and can urge its member countries, including the United States, to adopt Precautionary Measures to protect human rights in critical situations. The Emergency Request for Precautionary Measures, filed today by the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic on behalf of the group, asks the Commission to direct the United States government to set pollution limits that will finally protect the community from the extraordinary cancer risk of chloroprene and to immediately order Denka Performance Elastomer LLC (St. John the Baptist Parish), by far the largest U.S. emitter of chloroprene, to cease operations.

Residents of the adjacent community, which is in the heart of Louisiana's Cancer Alley and is disproportionately low-income and African American, have heartbreaking stories of premature death from cancer. Elva Perrilloux lost her youngest son. "My baby boy grew up less than a mile from the plant and worked there when he was diagnosed with a stomach cancer that grew to the size of a basketball. He was only 20 years old when he died of the cancer." According to the Environmental Protection Agency, children are more susceptible than adults to developing cancer from chloroprene exposure.

Mary Hampton, President of Concerned Citizens of St. John, sees a stark discrepancy between the urgency of this human rights crisis and the U.S. government's response: "The EPA and other agencies have failed our community for decades. We need action NOW."

The citizen group includes residents of Census Tract 708, where 92% of the population is African American and pollution-related cancer risk is far higher than anywhere else in the nation – nearly 50 times higher than the national average and more than 10 times higher than EPA's acceptable limit. As the Emergency Request describes, EPA has attributed most of this cancer risk to the emission of a

highly toxic pollutant, chloroprene, during the production of neoprene (a synthetic rubber used to make wetsuits, beer koozies, and other materials) at Denka Performance Elastomer LLC. The Emergency Request cites a recently-published study finding higher rates of cancer, respiratory problems, and other health issues among residents living closer to Denka, as well as school and hospital records suggesting that children in the community are being severely affected by air pollution. The Emergency Request includes the immediate relocation of Fifth Ward Elementary, where 79% of students are African American and 71% of students live near or below the federal poverty level. Denka (formerly Dupont) built its plant less than a half mile (0.8 km) from Fifth Ward, an historic African-American school.

Isabel Englehart, a Tulane Law Student who helped write the request, emphasized the urgency of the situation: “Hundreds of children are growing up learning and playing in a cloud of poison while the government drags its feet.”

“While there is no fully just remedy for the toxic burden placed on St. John over the past 50 years, these Precautionary Measures are crucial steps in securing protection of the community’s right to life and health,” according to Haley Gentry, a Tulane Law Student who also helped write the Emergency Request.

While residents were unknowingly exposed to chloroprene pollution for decades, the Emergency Request demonstrates an urgent need for action based on new evidence of health impacts, recent inadequate responses of the EPA and other U.S. agencies, and the devastating impact of COVID-19 on this community, which has been long burdened with toxic air pollution (a risk factor for COVID-19) and was reported to have the highest COVID-19 death rate in the nation.

Robert Taylor, Executive Director of the Concerned Citizens of St. John, says that the group is also [continuing to seek relief](#) from the U.S. agencies that have failed their community for decades. “The United States Environmental Protection Agency and Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality have conducted themselves more as surrogates of Denka than as protectors of the people,” said Taylor. “We demand that Denka cease operations until they can prove to the satisfaction of the people that their operations are safe and harmless.”

Mr. Taylor’s full press statement will be available at <https://www.ccosj.com/>.