



Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services

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NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ADVISORY COUNCIL

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T.e.j.a.s has been working on environmental justice issues along the Houston Ship Channel for over 16 years, we work at the intersection of human rights and social justice issues. We call Houston home and share that home with the largest petrochemical complex in the nation, second-largest in the world. It is also the largest city with no zoning. This means you can put parks, homes, and preschools next to petrochemical facilities, refineries, storage tanks and other industry infrastructure, in fact you can find living examples in our community of Manchester and throughout the Gulf Coast. 99% of plastic is derived from fossil fuels. Of those plastics produced they will derive from either fracked gas or oil. The explosion of natural gas production has led to ever increasing demand for natural gas liquid, rich in the chemicals that serve as the building blocks of plastic production. Naphtha, a product of oil refining is another key of production. Only five companies account for over half of global naphtha sales: BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell and China National Petroleum Corporation. Four of five have refining capacity along our coast within an hour of our front door.¹

We are already exposed to a dangerous mix of toxic pollutants, both authorized and unauthorized, released by many different industrial sources located along the Houston Ship Channel. Over the last several years that petrochemical complex has been expanding. Post hurricane Harvey we began tracking emissions and came to understand that the expansions hitting our communities were related to a rapidly, and ever-growing, market in plastic. Ethane crackers, terminals, and logistics plants all centered around one thing: the production of plastic. We understood that these expansions focused on ethylene crackers and LNG but now we began to understand the major economic pivot oil and gas is undergoing, shifting from traditional production into new forms of petroleum utilization. However, as they grew, so too did the instability of these petrochemical plants and with it has come an increase in chemical disasters.

In the most recent fire, 37 people were injured, some with first-degree burns. Workers were initially evacuated but later required to reenter the plant as the fire was still burning. To compound the problem, the Commission's Baytown air quality monitors malfunctioned during the event and thus deprived community members of invaluable air quality data to protect their health. While those fires blazed community members were wholly unaware of the fire or proper shelter-in-place procedures. ExxonMobil has a 10 year investment of \$20 billion in their Grow the Gulf Project.

Recently Disasters:

- ExxonMobil Fire March 16, 2019.
- The ITC fire, March 17, 2019 over 8 cities held hostage under a chemical plume 47 miles long 17 miles wide.²
- ExxonMobil Olefins Fire, July 31, 2019, 37 workers were injured.³
- September 20, 2019, 9 chemical barges collide after Tropical Storm Imelda damaging evacuation routes.⁴

¹ Center for International Environmental Law , *Fueling Plastics: Fossils, Plastic & Petrochemical Feedstocks* (September, 2019), available electronically <https://www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Fueling-Plastics-Fossils-Plastics-Petrochemical-Feedstocks.pdf>

² <https://www.click2houston.com/news/how-it-happened-a-timeline-of-the-deer-park-chemical-fire>

³ <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/ExxonMobil-s-Baytown-fire-the-latest-in-a-14270558.php#photo-18007536>

⁴ <https://www.khou.com/article/traffic/i-10-east-freeway-shut-down-after-barges-break-loose-hit-bridge/285-d522e91e-1a54-4b2d-9269-fe44d75f6c81>



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In a recent report the Center for International Environmental Law found that, “If trends in oil consumption continue as expected, the consumption of oil by the entire plastics sector will account for 20% of the total consumption by 2050.”

A recent study by uncovered “two-thirds of the 90 plastics-related facilities in the Houston region violated air pollution control laws over the last five years and were subject to enforcement actions. But many more exceeded their permits and were not penalized, state records show.”⁵ These compounding emissions result in cumulative impacts for neighboring communities, including an increased risk for developing cancer and other health conditions.

The production of plastic releases toxics like 1,3, butadiene, benzene, ethane, styrene, toluene. In the short term they look like: headaches, fatigue, weakness, memory loss, nausea, nose bleeds, unconsciousness. In the long term: asthma, anemia, central nervous system damage, childhood leukemia and other cancers, kidney and liver damage, sterility, and even death.⁶ The effect is even more severe on children, seniors and the already sick.

Plastic poses a distinct risk to public health from wellhead to waste. From our dinner table to the depths of our oceans. Every part of the chain that creates plastic harms us. Plastic had to be produced near vulnerable communities that used fossil fuel that were extracted next to PEOPLE. BLACK, BROWN, POOR, INDIGENOUS, IMMIGRANT and so many others had to pay the price in shortening the lives of our children’s health. The devastating extraction of from our land that shakes our earth. The production of plastic treats us as disposable, as a byproduct that can be ignored. OUR LIVES CANNOT AND WILL NOT BE SACRIFICED FOR CONVIENCE.

The American Chemistry Council predicts industry will invest in \$204 billion by 2030 on 334 new and expanded facilities in the US alone.⁷

We know our community is not alone in this struggle. The Gulf Coast is known for housing some of the most sophisticated refining capacity in the world. This should not come at the detriment of use at the fenceline.

For us on the fenceline, this is not an exercise in paper pushing or number crunching: not addressing this issue with the necessary enforcement disproportionately harms people of color. There is no amount of money that can make up health impacts from additional emissions and also fugitive emissions associated with additional units or points of emission.

It is vital that community voices be heard at the decision-making table, these are the daily decisions that can drastically alter the outcomes for generations to come. Legislation and policies that safeguard our already overburdened is necessary for our survival. You don’t have to lose a child, mother or friend to understand our fight for life.

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⁵ Environmental Integrity Project, *Growth of Houston-Are Plastics Industry Threatens Air Quality and Public Safety* (September 5, 2019), available electronically at <https://www.environmentalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Plastics-Pollution-on-the-Rise-report-final.pdf>.

⁶ <https://www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Plastic-and-Health-The-Hidden-Costs-of-a-Plastic-Planet-February-2019.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.americanchemistry.com/Policy/Energy/Shale-Gas/>