Reserve, Louisiana Rises Up

Down in Louisiana, along the Mississippi River, you will find a labyrinth. A maze of bayous, lakes and swamps filled with an abundance of life around every turn. However, if you look a little deeper between the crevices, you will find brown pools of water, large clouds of black smoke, hazardous waste, dangerous chemicals, and most importantly, high cancer rates due to toxic air. But one small, poor Black community sitting amidst this stew and stench has had enough. Residents of Reserve, Louisiana, many of whose families have lived there for generations, are fighting back.

Across the United States, air quality has improved since the 1980s when the Clean Air Act established pollutant standards. But for the poor Black communities of Louisiana, industrial plants are increasing the amount of cancer-causing chemicals in the air. Within this 85-mile stretch of terrain, there are over 150 chemical plants and oil refineries. Since 1987, this region has been known as “Cancer Alley” because of its large concentration of petrochemical facilities. Now, thirty years later, pollutant emissions may gain new rules thanks to a recently proposed consent decree presented by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
At the epicenter of Cancer Alley sits the town of Reserve, Louisiana. As a result of a synthetic rubber plant on its border, the EPA estimates that the cancer risk rate in Reserve — 1500 cases per million people — is 50 times the national average. The culprit? Denka Performance Elastomer, the synthetic rubber plant, is the only place in the United States that emits chloroprene, a likely human carcinogen. The EPA states that over a human lifetime, chloroprene emissions over 0.2 micrograms per cubic meter (ug/m3) are considered unsafe for human health. Air monitoring around the rubber plant confirms that emissions exceed the EPA guidance on a regular basis, despite Denka’s 2017 agreement to reduce its emissions.

Reserve, within St. John the Baptist Parish, sits along a series of bends of the Mississippi River. Black people make up 60.6% of the total population of 8,611, double the percentage of any other race or ethnicity. Census data from 2019 also shows a poverty rate for Reserve of 26.4% compared to the national average of 12.3%. Many families have generations of roots in the town and refuse to move. For many others, the dangerous levels of toxic emissions have destroyed the town’s property values so that they cannot afford to move. But this outcome is no accident. Reserve’s highly polluting industry was purposely built in a poor, minority community because developers at the time knew that the community had neither the money nor the resources to fight back. Today, adverse health effects are widespread – life after life is taken by disease and cancer runs rampant throughout the town.
That’s why after years of toxic exposures, the Black community of St. John the Baptist parish has now brought two lawsuits against the EPA. The lawsuits claimed violations of the Clean Air Act due to the EPA’s failing to control emissions from Denka that include chloroprene, ethylene oxide, and formaldehyde. In April of this year, the EPA opened a few civil rights investigations in the area. They wanted to see if permits granted within this industrialized area have ignored the rights of its Black residents. Then, in June 2022, a proposed agreement called a consent decree, was brought to the table. It states that the EPA will act on “necessary” revisions to the emission standards by March 2023 and “final action” in 2024. It would have the ability to settle both lawsuits. Additionally, the EPA would have to review their air pollutant standards and possibly create new rules on how to govern pollutant emissions for all petrochemical plants in the region.

What happens now and where do we go from here? The people of Reserve, Louisiana have provided a telling example of the dangers of toxic chemicals and the importance of fighting back. Their brave actions raise national awareness of injustices often faced by low-income communities and people of color and could prove instrumental in increasing the study of these toxic chemicals. Large industries like Denka, as well as the EPA, must be held accountable. Environmental justice advocates will watch carefully how the proposed consent decree deal plays out and if agreements are kept. But for now, the citizens of Reserve have given us a crucial step forward for community power, environmental protection, human rights, and, most importantly, environmental justice.
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