

The Environmental Fallout of Toxic Plastics

Louisiana to Hold Hearing on Massive Formosa Plastics Toxic Chemical Complex

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Global Research, July 10, 2019

[Center for Biological Diversity](#) 8 July 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Law and Justice](#)

Louisiana will hold a public hearing on issuing 15 air permits for Taiwanese company Formosa Plastics. The massive proposed complex would be one of the largest and most toxic plastic production facilities in the world.

On Tuesday, July 9, at 6 p.m., the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality will hear public comments on the Formosa chemical complex, a proposed project that would create 14 new chemical plants in a largely African-American community. The hearing will be held at the Westbank Reception Area, 2455 Highway 18, Vacherie, Louisiana. A short press conference will be held at 5:30 p.m., prior to the hearing.

Sharon Lavigne, founder and director of Rise St. James, stressed the importance of the residents of St. James Parish learning about the chemical complex and voicing their opinions before the state of Louisiana issues any permits.

“The people of St. James don’t know what’s going on,” Lavigne said. “The people I talk to don’t know about the chemicals or the effects. They can’t even pronounce the names of the chemicals. Once people have knowledge, their eyes will open. But by the time this plant is built, it will be too late.”

LDEQ is currently dealing with the environmental fallout from other pollution-spewing facilities nearby, including the Denka chemical plant in St. John Parish and the mountainous radioactive wastewater lake from the Mosaic fertilizer plant in St. James Parish. The state has the opportunity to stop Formosa’s 14 toxic plants before they have a chance to do any damage.

“Once the state has issued its permits, it’s much harder for the residents to do anything about the plants,” said Kendall Dix, a representative of Healthy Gulf. “It’s vital that residents attend the hearing and give testimony or submit written comments to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality so the state has an accurate picture of whether the residents actually want to live near what would be one of the most toxic chemical complexes on Earth.”

Formosa would be located in the 5th District of St. James Parish, an area on the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans known for its high cancer rates and high concentration of industrial development in African-American communities. Formosa, a company with a long and well-documented history of pollution in Baton Rouge, Texas, Taiwan, and Vietnam, did not submit a single proposed alternative site in a non-black

neighborhood in its permit application. Formosa's 2016 chemical spill in Vietnam put thousands of fishermen out of work and represented the largest industrial disaster in the nation's history.

The plant has faced fierce opposition from local residents who have been fighting against petrochemical development since the term "Cancer Alley" was first coined to describe the region in the 1980s. At the hearing for the coastal use permit on Dec. 6, dozens of people spoke out against the plant, with only one person speaking in favor of the plant.

The Formosa complex would emit the second-highest amount of ethylene oxide *and* the second-highest amount of benzene of any plant in a state already full of large-scale industrial development. Both ethylene oxide and benzene are known human carcinogens and cause numerous other chronic health problems.

A 2009 Texas A&M study provides strong evidence of genetic damage to cattle located downwind from Formosa's facility in Point Comfort, Texas. The damage increased with greater proximity to Formosa.

"The majority of chemicals released were potential to known carcinogens with some released in high amounts," the study found.

"The proposed Formosa chemical complex is an environmental and public health disaster waiting to happen," said Adrienne Bloch, Earthjustice senior attorney. "The St. James Parish community deserves clean air, clean water, and a say on what gets built in their own backyard. We'll be standing with our partners at LDEQ's public hearing to make sure their voices are heard."

The Formosa complex is part of a push to turn the byproducts of natural gas extraction into feedstock for single-use plastic packaging and consumer products. The fossil fuel industry plans to increase plastic production by 40 percent over the next decade, adding to the growing ocean plastic pollution crisis.

"We can't let Formosa pollute Louisiana's air just to create more throwaway plastic. This community has already suffered from exposure to dangerous industrial pollutants for far too long," said Lauren Packard, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Formosa's project would emit 13 million tons of greenhouse gases per year, the same as three coal-fired power plants. Polluting Louisiana's air to make disposable plastics we don't need is a terrible idea."

Formosa will be gifted \$12 million in a cash grant from the state of Louisiana and another \$1.5 billion in tax breaks for its new plastics complex through the controversial Industrial Tax Exemption Permit. But with plastic products being banned in Europe and municipalities across the U.S., the demand for Formosa's output is likely to decline over time. Additionally, the value of neighboring homes that residents have invested in for generations will be wiped out, never to be recovered.

The complex will destroy more than 100 acres of wetlands, making flooding worse and increasing the risk of a chemical spill during a natural disaster. With the Mississippi River at flood stage during hurricane season and new hurricane maps showing storm surges of 10

feet or higher affecting even Baton Rouge, it's a matter of when — not if —Cancer Alley floods.

Formosa's 13 million tons of annual carbon dioxide emissions will worsen climate change and increase the likelihood of devastating hurricanes. The Formosa project is therefore incompatible with the state's \$50 billion master plan to slow down the loss of its coast.

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