

Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee Legislative Hearing

Protecting Coastal Communities and Ocean Resources from Offshore Drilling

H.R. 570, H.R. 2643, H.R. 2836, H.R. 3048, H.R. 3053, and H.R.

May 25, 2021

Response of Cynthia Sarthou; Executive Director, Healthy Gulf to questions posed by Representative McEachin

1. Ms. Sarthou, it's well established that disadvantaged communities bear the brunt of the health and environmental impacts of fossil fuel drilling and industrial development. This is such a significant issue in your state of Louisiana that a stretch along the Mississippi River is nicknamed "Cancer Alley." Is there a connection between the health impacts experienced by residents in "Cancer Alley" and offshore drilling?

Yes, there is a direct link that exists between oil transported from offshore production by pipelines and oil refineries, petrochemical complexes (i.e., Shell NORCO, the Chevron Refinery), and fertilizer manufacturers (i.e. CF Industries) located in the corridor between New Orleans and Baton Rouge known as Cancer Alley. This link also exists in areas of Cameron/Calcasieu Parishes in Louisiana. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 2014 National Air Toxics Assessment (NATA) (the most recent) shows a disproportionately high cancer risk from air pollution for communities in Cancer Alley. For example, the NATA analysis of the five census tracts in St. John the Baptist Parish show that they have **the highest cancer risk in the country**. The parish is home to the Dupont chemical plant and Denka Performance Elastomer. Pollutants released by industries in these parishes include Ethylene Oxide and Chloroprene, both likely carcinogens. Denka has been repeatedly investigated and fined for releasing chloroprene.

Residents of fence-line communities in the river parishes in Cancer Alley have for years complained of health problems including high rates of cancer, respiratory illnesses and rashes. For example, the people in areas of Cancer Alley complain of rashes and other health issues. See i.e., *Down Cancer Alley: The Lived Experience of Health and Environmental Suffering in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor*, [Medical Anthropology Quarterly](#) 25(2) p. 146-147. However, no robust studies have been done to see whether there is a link between the cancers or other illness in these communities and air pollution. The State of Louisiana does maintain a cancer tumor registry, but that registry does not look at causation or links to pollution, so the registry cannot support any conclusions in that regard.

Communities in Cancer Alley and other industrial corridors also often suffer health risks associated with needing to "shelter in place" when unexpected releases of toxic chemicals, fires, or explosions occur. Sheltering in place requires shutting all windows and turning off air

conditioners to prevent toxic air pollutants from entering homes. This is particularly dangerous when temperature exceed 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

Additional Information:

- *Down Cancer Alley: The Lived Experience of Health and Environmental Suffering in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor*, [Medical Anthropology Quarterly](#) 25(2):141-63 (June 2011)

- Environmental racism in Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley', must end, say UN human rights experts; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086172>;

- *St. John Parish group files international human rights appeal over Denka air pollution Reserve plant's owner says group's allegations are 'disproven by real-world evidence'*
https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_685c8b2e-b72d-11eb-bae1-333baf276d13.html

2. As you know, my legislation, the Offshore Accountability Act, aims to improve oversight and accountability of existing offshore drilling facilities. Do you believe there's currently enough public transparency required of the offshore oil and gas industry, and would coastal communities benefit if the industry was required to publicly report failures of blowout preventors and other critical safety systems?

No, there is little to no public transparency regarding offshore oil and gas operation. Coastal communities receive very little information about the operations offshore, and would benefit from this knowledge. There is a public presumption, as there was before BP, that the risk of blowouts and catastrophic spills is very low. Once you dig into agency data on spills, accidents or other incidents, obtain documents via a FOIA request, or talk to oil field workers, you discover that all too frequently there are smaller accidents, pollution releases and near misses that are not communicated to the public. For example, there was the near miss on the Transocean Asgard in October of 2020, which I discussed in my testimony. No information about that incident was released to the public until 2021 and even then it was not widely disseminated. In fact only the DeSmog Blog reported on it.

There is also a lack of transparency in how companies are held to account when their actions lead to a spill. In the case of prominent accidents like BP, the company had to go through a Natural Resource Damage assessment and pay Clean Water Act penalties for every barrel they spilled, but it's unclear how consistently this is happening with less infamous spills and accidents. Often when Healthy Gulf reports spills, we have difficulty figuring out whether state and federal agencies responded to the reports, what action was taken to contain the spill and ultimately whether the company responsible was held financially accountable.