

**Written Testimony of**

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Communities Coalition**

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Good morning, Chairman Stauber, Ranking Member Ocasio-Cortez, and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Erandi Treviño, and I am a community organizer with Public Citizen, based in Houston, Texas. Public Citizen is a national non-profit organization with over 500,000 members and supporters. For more than 50 years, we have advocated for the public interest with considerable success through lobbying, litigation, administrative advocacy, research, and public education on a broad range of issues.

I am a member of the Healthy Port Communities Coalition, a group of organizations – including Public Citizen – working to improve the quality of life of communities near the Houston Ship Channel and the quality of essential resources for all.

Houston is known worldwide as an energy powerhouse. It has one of the largest ports in the U.S. and is home to the largest petrochemical industrial complex in the country.

The same industrial complex, a powerful and revered economic engine, is also home to multiple communities referred to as sacrifice zones.

Sacrifice zones are places exposed to concentrated levels of pollutants and hazardous materials that cause adverse health effects. We call them this because the health of people in these communities is sacrificed for corporate profits.

People living in sacrifice zones are far more likely to develop chronic health conditions such as asthma and other respiratory diseases, and cancer, to name just a few. This is why the rates of cancer and illness in sacrifice zones are disproportionately elevated and they are some of the most environmentally vulnerable. Yet, it impacts many Americans. Roughly a third of the United States population lives with air that does not meet acceptable federal standards.

When I was 7, my mother, younger sister, and I emigrated from northern Mexico to the East End, a neighborhood next to the Houston Ship Channel. This is a common landing spot for many immigrants. Sadly, children who grow up within two miles of the Houston Ship Channel are 56% more likely to be diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia, compared to children 10 or more miles away.

Today, my family and I still live, work, and go to school in sacrifice zones. We have learned the hard way that even when we avoid something as serious as cancer, living in a sacrifice zone means that our health is threatened in other ways. Our neighbors include a parking lot for 18-wheelers with diesel engines that idle around-the-clock, a demolition company, a crate manufacturer, and several factories. We also live close to major highways and an expanding international airport. In short, we confront the effects of cumulative sources of pollution that surround us.

The results from living in a sacrifice zone is painfully reflected in my life, in the life of my family, and in our neighbors who have been diagnosed with cancer or other chronic illness. It is also quantified in the EPA's EJ Screen, which shows people in my neighborhood have air toxics Cancer risk in the nation's 94th percentile.

My mother and I both suffer from a series of health conditions that lead to pain, inflammation, and numerous other symptoms. To function semi-normally, I take 8 pills a day, control my diet, my sleep, and my activities as much as I can. But the conditions outside my door, which I cannot control, can make an average day unbearable regardless of how careful I am inside my home. It is what happens when industrial leaks, fires, and diesel-choked areas are commonplace and so close to home.

An average week for my mom and I includes us taking turns caring for each other, because we lose at least a few days every week to pain, fatigue, brain fog, dizziness, nausea, inflammation, and headaches. One thing is for sure: my symptoms are directly linked to the industrial activity nearby and pose the biggest challenge in my life.

In my years of community organizing, I have met more and more people who were healthy and have begun to feel the effects of living close to the oil and gas industry. For many, it is recurring congestion, headaches, stomach aches, nausea, or skin reactions.

The Gulf of Mexico is the largest offshore fossil fuel production basin in the United States. Decisions on expanding production in the region should rely on assessing current operations and the impact on the health of communities and their resources.

The fossil fuel industry remains one of the biggest employers in Texas. Oil extraction does provide economic benefits to our economy. However, expectations for growth should be tempered by the entire circumstances created by expanded extraction.

Economic growth projections should account for the instability and cyclical nature of the energy sector, the tax breaks enjoyed by the industry, the inherent danger to workers, the permanent impacts on our environment, and most important to me and my community, the damage borne by the people living and working nearby. Resulting medical expenses fall on frontline communities. Many communities that will see the highest medical costs related to the energy sector are also low-income and need adequate access to healthcare.

One can only talk about benefits by also talking about risks. New open offshore areas risk permanent damage to our oceans and beaches, and prolongs dependency on oil. When oil

spills occur, they can bring catastrophic harm to marine life and devastating losses to local businesses. Even routine exploration and drilling activities bring harm to many marine species.

Deepwater Horizon was the most high-profile Gulf oil spill of the last decade, but smaller spills happen often. Oil spills result in devastating economic losses upon coastal communities and spills take a severe toll on coastal economies, including our approximately \$35 billion commercial fishing and \$60 billion ocean and coastal tourism and recreation industries. The damage and clean-up costs following the Exxon Valdez spill were so extensive that Exxon paid out more than one billion dollars to the federal and state governments for damages and clean-up costs—and still owes fishermen, Alaska Natives, business owners, and others a billion dollars.

Private industry development of offshore resources does little to support the average Texan, especially because projected growth does not consider the costs to communities. In Texas, it is not unusual for oil and gas operations to qualify for exemptions from various types of taxes. This includes school district property taxes which have skyrocketed for the average Texas homeowner in the last few years. Texas homeowners are struggling with inflation while industry is often granted breaks.

In the end, despite all our sacrifices, my neighborhood still has an unreliable electricity grid, and people periodically face rolling black outs. We have high property taxes, and utility costs that grow reliably every year. People are left to make calculations on whether to stay, go, play outside, come back in, move, sell. It does not seem that more drilling will alleviate these pressures.

The US remains the largest oil producer in the world. Any additional extraction is not intended to fulfill a domestic need for oil, but rather much of it would be an export destined for China. While it would not benefit the average consumer, it will tack on additional weight on communities already bearing more than their fair share.

There are many coastal communities whose health is suffering in the name of profit. At some point, the sacrifice zones that have been toughened by adversity will buckle under the cumulative effects of a heavily industrial region.