

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Activists urge Biden to cancel permits for La. plastics plant

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Anne Rolfes of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade speaks outside the New Orleans Army Corps of Engineers office in opposition to a Formosa Plastics Group plant. Louisiana Bucket Brigade

A coalition of environmental justice groups in Louisiana is calling on the Biden administration to cancel permits for a controversial plastics plant because of the potential impact on local community members.

The Formosa Plastics Group petrochemical complex has been under fire for more than a year, as groups have worked to demonstrate that the \$9.4 billion project is a toxic and unnecessary burden on St. James Parish, where it's being constructed.

"St. James Parish is a sacrifice zone, and it shouldn't be," Rise St. James founder Sharon Lavigne said. "Why should we give up our lives for industry?"

In November, a state court ruled that regulators didn't properly consider the impact of the complex on the Black communities it neighbors ([Greenwire](#), Nov. 20, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Army Corps of Engineers is revisiting permits initially approved for the site. The federal agency is examining whether dredge-and-fill activities necessary to the plant's construction would harm wetlands or violate Clean Water Act protections.

Activists are hoping those permits will be denied.

Anne Rolfes, director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, said President Biden can take a stand for the values of environmental and climate justice he touted during the campaign by coming out against the project.

"Here's a chance to kill two birds with one stone: You stop Formosa Plastics, then you also stop a huge climate bomb from going off on the planet," Rolfes said.

Activists say the location and approval of the plant are clear signs of environmental racism.

The complex will be built next to a church and the last school in its census tract, St. James resident Gail Leboeuf said.

"We are not going to stand for these plants to come and push these children out of their school buildings," Leboeuf said. "We are not going to allow our children to not have a future."

The region is drawing international attention for the disproportionate impacts of pollution. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights called the development of petrochemical plants in the "Cancer Alley" region a form of environmental racism.

African American neighborhoods in the parish face a substantially higher risk than white neighborhoods, according to data from EPA's National Air Toxics Assessment Map. The Formosa Plastics Group's project would be one of the largest plastic production facilities in the world, and U.N. experts said it would double the risk of cancer in the parish.

"There is a system of racial cleansing going on through petrochemical construction," Rolfes said. "They're defending the white part of the parish, and they're rolling out the red carpet in the Black part of the parish."

So far, local politicians have remained supportive of the project. Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards (D) has often thrown his support behind petrochemical projects, saying they boost the state's economy.

According to Formosa, its latest facility would add 1,200 permanent new jobs and provide \$500 million in local spending.

But some say the purported economic benefits come with such large tax write-offs as to render them inefficient at uplifting the community, the Associated Press has **reported**.

At the rally, the Rev. Gregory Manning said that the region is "all filled up" with pollution and the Army Corps of Engineers needs to hear the protesters' demands.

"We don't need plastics. We need green jobs," Manning said.

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