

EPA Wants to Cut Toxic Emissions in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley"

Mostly Black communities live among the chemical plants of the Louisiana parish, where cancer risk is seven times the national average.

April 12, 2023 By Laura Schmidt

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Michael Regan visited an industrial area in southern Louisiana known as "Cancer Alley" to announce a proposal that will reduce the amount of airborne chemical toxins released by a rubber plant facility and others in the country.

Standing at the site of the Denka Performance Elastomer plant in LaPlace, [Louisiana](#), Regan announced a proposal that would reduce toxic [air pollution](#) by more than 6,000 tons a year, according to an [NBC News article](#). The proposal will require chemical facilities to monitor their emissions and take action when they surpass a specified level.

"This rule is absolutely a game changer for many of these communities," Regan said in an interview with [NBC News](#).

The Denka facility is one of more than 150 chemical plants built along an 85-mile stretch between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. For decades, toxic chemicals from these plants have affected nearby communities, which consist primarily of Black residents.

The Denka plant produces chloroprene, a chemical used to make a synthetic rubber called neoprene, which is used in wetsuits and adhesives. In 2010, the EPA categorized chloroprene as a likely human carcinogen. Despite this, reports NBC, the EPA did not warn the community about the Denka plant until 2016.

The [cancer risk](#) in the area surrounding the Denka plant is nearly seven times the national average, according to the EPA.

Community activists in St. John the Baptist Parish have been calling for cleaner air for years and are praising the EPA administrator for acting to reduce toxic emissions.

Robert Taylor, 82, who in 2016 cofounded the community group Concerned Citizens of St. John, told NBC that he hadn't heard "a peep" from public officials since the group was established. "It means so much to me that we now have someone in some agencies and parts of the government

that not only heard our cry [but] came to our defense,” Taylor told NBC.

In February, the [Justice Department filed a complaint to force Denka](#) to reduce chloroprene emissions in the LaPlace plant, located about 450 feet from an elementary school. The complaint asserts that the plant presents “an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health and welfare due to the cancer risks from Denka’s chloroprene emissions.”

“The Justice Department’s environmental justice efforts require ensuring that every community, no matter its demographics, can breathe clean air and drink clean water,” said Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta in the complaint. “Our suit aims to stop Denka’s dangerous pollution.”

For more about that situation, see the related NBC article from last month titled “Toxic School: How the Government Failed Black Residents in Louisiana’s ‘Cancer Alley.’”

Regan told NBC that the proposal would be the first to legally enforce safety levels for more than 80 toxic chemicals, including chloroprene. He added that the Biden administration has supports the proposal and hopes the rule will be finalized by next spring.

To learn more about the intersection of cancer and Black communities, click [#African American](#). You’ll find articles such as “[Older Black and Latino Cancer Patients Less Likely to Receive Opioids for Pain Relief](#),” “[Bringing End-of-Life Hospice Care to African Americans](#)” and “[Thoughts on World Cancer Day and Black History Month 2023](#).”