**Headline:** Plastic Pollution Is a Crime Against People and the Planet

**Teaser:** Plastic particles and chemicals pollute all of our bodies. But people living on the fencelines of the fossil fuel, plastic, and waste industries face even more life-threatening pollution.

By Erica Cirino

**Author Bio:** Erica Cirino is a writer, artist, and author who explores the intersection of the human and more-than-human worlds. Her photographic and written works have appeared in Scientific American, the Guardian, VICE, Hakai Magazine, the Atlantic, and other publications. She is a recipient of fellowships from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, and others, as well as several awards for visual art. She is a contributor to the [Observatory](https://observatory.wiki/Erica_Cirino).

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**[Article Body:]**

Louisiana’s “River Parishes,” located along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, shoulder some of the worst industry impacts in the United States. As a result, this region has acquired a grim reputation as “[Cancer Alley](https://www.southerncultures.org/article/cancer-alley/).” Stretching across 85 miles of rural land along both banks of the Mississippi River are [around 200 industrial plants](https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/01/25/were-dying-here/fight-life-louisiana-fossil-fuel-sacrifice-zone)—many of which process fossil fuels to produce petrochemicals and plastics, “reportedly the largest concentration of such plants in the [Western Hemisphere](https://lsupress.org/9780807171134/ecocriticism-and-the-future-of-southern-studies),” according to a 2024 Human Rights Watch report.

Across the U.S., most regions show a cancer risk of around [five to twenty-five in a million](https://epa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/mapviewer/index.html?webmap=5c5866f7ef714d2e8ab98a4a7a2ae199), based on my assessment of 2019 Environmental Protection Agency data. For people living in Welcome, Louisiana, in St. James Parish, and across the rest of Cancer Alley, that risk runs at least double—[and in some places, is up to seven times greater than—the national average](https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/01/25/were-dying-here/fight-life-louisiana-fossil-fuel-sacrifice-zone). Across St. James Parish, [about a dozen polluting facilities, many of them petrochemical plants](https://www.epa.gov/toxics-release-inventory-tri-program), emit a constant cocktail of emissions, including toxic and carcinogenic ethylene oxide and formaldehyde. This, plus all the light, noise, and diesel emissions from constant freight train, tanker, and truck traffic, and frequent spills of gas, oil, chemicals, and plastic pellets from machinery, pipelines, and vehicles, makes the region a constant health hazard for residents.

While plastic and other consumer products pollute our environment and—as scientists have detected—[our bodies](https://observatory.wiki/Nanoplastics_Are_Entering_Our_Bodies), they begin inflicting harm far before they’re sold farther up the pipeline. A survey of plastic’s impacts isn’t complete without taking into account how plastic and other industrial manufacturing pollutes air, soil, and water—especially in communities where poor, rural, Black, Indigenous, and people of color live.

**St. James Parish, Louisiana**

Living in Welcome, a predominantly African American neighborhood in St. James Parish, retired special education teacher [Sharon Lavigne](https://truthout.org/articles/if-we-dont-act-now-the-entire-us-could-become-a-cancer-alley/) (born in 1950) has watched her neighbors and family members grow ill with cancers, heart problems, autoimmune disorders, and other conditions known to be caused by a variety of factors that include, most notably, [exposure to industrial fossil fuel pollutants](https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMra2300476). The governmental, political, and corporate systems and cultures enabling and favoring the unjust placement of polluting industries in Black communities like Welcome are [textbook examples of environmental racism](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3132626).

The consequences are clear: In America, Black people are more likely to die prematurely [due to toxic air pollution](https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/disparities) because decades of [racist](https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/disparities) housing, voting, financing, and other social policies have made sure that the air they breathe is the dirtiest in the country. People who are Indigenous, unhoused, poor, or belong to other historically underserved groups share this increased risk of pollution exposure. While America’s Clean Air Act of 1970 has, over time, [reduced some disparity](https://www.epa.gov/clean-air-act-overview/evolution-clean-air-act) in populations made to bear the burden of industrial pollution, to this day, industries continue to overwhelmingly target underserved communities—often [enticed](https://observatory.wiki/%E2%80%98Sacrifice_Zones%E2%80%99%3A_How_People_of_Color_Are_Targets_of_Environmental_Racism) by local governments looking to profit from development.

Protecting communities from further colonization by industries requires constant effort. In 2017, Lavigne and her neighbors watched as the state wrested an enormous rural plot, formerly home to two plantations, from the local community and quietly [sold it to FG LA LLC (FG)](https://www.reuters.com/article/brief-formosa-petrochemicals-unit-fg-la/brief-formosa-petrochemicals-unit-fg-la-llc-acquires-land-in-the-u-s-for-34-65-mln-idUKL4N1MY2MV/), one of many business endeavors run by the Taiwanese manufacturing conglomerate Formosa Plastics Group. By 2018, then-Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards and Formosa executive Keh-Yen Lin announced [FG’s plans](https://www.opportunitylouisiana.gov/news/formosa-selects-st-james-parish-for-9-4-billion-louisiana-project) to build a $9.4 billion chemical and plastic complex on the land the company had bought.

To prevent further industrial colonization of her community, in 2018, Lavigne retired from teaching to form [RISE St. James Louisiana](https://risestjames.org/), a faith-based activist organization whose members document pollution, attend public hearings and community meetings, bring lawsuits against polluters and dysfunctional government regulatory agencies, write to lawmakers, and pray.

By 2024, Lavigne and RISE had prevented FG from completing its plan to build in Welcome what has grown to be a proposed [$12 billion complex](https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/business/major-formosa-plastics-plant-in-st-james-may-cost-12-billion-rating-agency-estimates/article_2b6e6294-3ee9-11eb-9ade-f77bb74ae6f1.html) of 16 facilities spread across the 2,400-acre plot—[according to a 2019 ProPublica investigation done along with other publications](https://www.propublica.org/article/what-could-happen-if-a-9.4-billion-chemical-plant-comes-to-cancer-alley). This complex would more than triple Welcome residents’ exposure to cancer-causing chemicals.

FG’s plant is expected to spew [13.6 million tons](https://www.wwno.org/coastal-desk/2024-01-24/a-louisiana-court-just-revived-plans-for-the-countrys-biggest-plastics-plant) of carbon dioxide into the air each year, [the amount of carbon](https://www.epa.gov/energy/greenhouse-gas-equivalencies-calculator#results) that 3 million cars would add to the atmosphere in one year. This is [in a region already feeling the heat](https://nca2023.globalchange.gov/chapter/22/) cast by humanity’s uncontrolled greenhouse gas emissions—oppressively hot, humid days and sinking coastlines, deadly floods, and catastrophic storms have occurred more frequently and intensely than ever.

Even if the U.S. and the rest of the world curbed carbon emissions right now, between 2040 and 2060, experts estimate that [between 2 and 5 percent](https://projects.propublica.org/climate-migration) of St. James will be regularly underwater at high tide, with temperatures soaring high enough to make it too dangerous to go outside. This will become a regular occurrence.

**Point Comfort, Texas**

Residents in Welcome who are wondering what a new plastic plant would mean for their community can get an idea from Point Comfort, Texas, a small working-class port community about 400 miles west of Welcome, Louisiana, where [more than 50 percent](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/point-comfort-tx/) of residents are Latino, Black, Asian, or biracial. In Point Comfort, Formosa [operates](https://www.texastribune.org/2024/03/08/texas-reservoir-formosa-chemical-expansion/) a plastic complex comparable in size and design to that proposed for St. James Parish. There, Formosa’s biggest opponent has been Diane Wilson, a fourth-generation fisherwoman and retired shrimp boat captain who has spent more than 30 years documenting and challenging the pollution caused by the company in court.

Wilson’s efforts include [a 1994 lawsuit](https://www.tceq.texas.gov/assets/public/comm_exec/agendas/comm/backup/HR-RFR/2015-1528-IWD-ProR.pdf) that saw Formosa agreeing not to discharge any plastic from its Texas facility into Lavaca Bay—a [promise](https://www.desmog.com/2020/01/18/diane-wilson-formosa-point-comfort-texas-plastic-pollution-settlement/) the company ultimately failed to keep. She waded and paddled with her kayak into the facility’s outfall pipes along Cox Creek, scooping plastic pellets and powder into thousands of store-bought plastic bags.

Wilson used these samples as evidence in court to challenge the company, ultimately garnering a [$50 million settlement](https://www.texastribune.org/2019/12/03/texas-judge-approves-settlement-agreement-water-pollution-formosa/) in the largest Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act lawsuit ever filed by a private individual. Since the settlement, Formosa has agreed to pay [about $3 million in fines](https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/texas-plastics-corporation-will-pay-nearly-3-million-violating-clean-air-act-0) in 2021 for its continued pollution and [nearly $30 million to clean up](https://www.portlavacawave.com/news/around_town/cox-creek-cleanup-to-begin/article_0dc02000-395d-11ed-9a90-af327164f027.html) its plastic pollution from nearby waterways in 2022, which Wilson and her allies at San Antonio Bay Estuarine Waterkeeper have continued to monitor.

**Ha Tinh, Vietnam**

Formosa is a massive industrial manufacturing conglomerate based in Taiwan that runs about 100 companies spanning petrochemical processing, electronics production, and biotechnology worldwide. Formosa’s subsidiaries have been accused or found guilty of polluting in [every country](https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/blog/2023/12/13/international-alliance-holds-hunger-strike-seeks-justice-for-victims-of-formosas-industrial-polluti) they operate.

Formosa’s extensive industrial portfolio means it creates an enormous array of industrial emissions. [In 2016](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2514848620973164), the company’s steelworks in Ha Tinh, Vietnam, discharged toxic wastes into local waterways. The chemical emissions killed many marine animals, hurt the local environment, and [affected](https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/blog/2023/12/13/international-alliance-holds-hunger-strike-seeks-justice-for-victims-of-formosas-industrial-pollution) more than [5 million people across four of Vietnam’s provinces](https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphjennings/2016/08/11/why-mass-fish-kill-in-vietnam-still-smells-fishy-despite-a-solution/?sh=1d0f6c711984)—the work of [more than 179,000 fisherpeople](https://www.4imfa.org/occupy) in the region was ground to a standstill as a result of this.

After scientists revealed the extent of damage, Formosa [publicly admitted it caused the pollution](https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/water/taiwanese-firm-apologises-to-vietnam-for-environmental-disaster-54695). [Yet, residents say this has not helped address the 2016 disaster or curb continued pollution from the Formosa plant](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/formosa_pollution-10272022160139.html). The company was eventually required to provide [$500 million](https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL4N19G1CJ/) in compensation, but victims of the 2016 disaster say the Vietnamese government [has not correctly distributed the funds](https://www.ucanews.com/news/vietnamese-fishermen-still-victims-of-marine-disaster/82028).

In 2022, Wilson and Lavigne joined Texas-based filmmaker Nancy Bui, an advocate for those harmed by Formosa’s pollution in Vietnam, to form the [International Monitor Formosa Alliance](https://www.4imfa.org/) (IMFA). IMFA is an international alliance representing human rights, peace, justice, environmental, and commercial fishing organizations that seek justice for victims of Formosa’s and other corporations’ industrial pollution in Vietnam and beyond.

In May 2023, Bui, Lavigne, and Wilson [traveled](https://newbloommag.net/2023/06/27/monitor-formosa-interview/) to Taiwan to tell Formosa shareholders during their annual meeting how the company has harmed people and the environment, especially in South Texas and Vietnam. They emphasized that while residents of South Texas won a lawsuit resulting in a major settlement, residents harmed by Formosa’s pollution in Vietnam had not, despite [more than 8,000 people filing a lawsuit](https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/group-applauds-taiwan-supreme-court-ruling-in-favor-of-vietnam-victims-of-toxic-spill/) calling for accountability—and urged the company to take action. Until then, victims of Formosa’s pollution at the Ha Tinh steel factory and their allies continue to fight for their rights.

Unfortunately, Welcome, Point Comfort, and Ha Tinh are just a few of many regions facing the devastating pollution and environmental injustice caused by the fossil fuel and plastics industries. With the increasing expansion of plastic and petrochemical production—despite dwindling fossil fuels—come growing streams of pollution trespassing into our homes and bodies.

Across the world, frontline communities and their allies are uniting to hold corporations accountable for their harm to people and the planet. These activists and advocates for environmental justice are calling for an end to the growth of lethal industries that pollute the air, water, soil, and human bodies.

These efforts have become especially important in light of World Health Organization findings that industrial activities and infrastructure contribute to [99 percent of the global population breathing unhealthy air](https://www.who.int/news/item/04-04-2022-billions-of-people-still-breathe-unhealthy-air-new-who-data), [one in three people worldwide not having access to safe drinking water](https://www.who.int/news/item/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who), and [worsening soil pollution widely threatening human health](https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/9f84ec0f-7280-4937-91f5-fa54bdd886a1). Ultimately, activists and advocates show us that, without systemic action, environmental injustices will continue to grow unchecked.