

**Sharon Lavigne, Founder, Rise St. James
Testimony**

“Impacts of Plastic Production and Disposal on Environmental Justice Communities”

U.S. Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works
Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice, and Regulatory
Oversight
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I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Sharon Lavigne, and I am a lifelong resident of Saint James, Louisiana. I was a special education teacher for 38 years at St. James High School. I retired in 2019. This was my high school and the one that my father, Milton Cayette, Sr., integrated in 1966 when he was the President of the NAACP’s local chapter.

I am a mother of six children and grandmother of twelve. I live in the 5th district of my parish, which is 85% African American. On one side lies the Mississippi River. On the other lies sugarcane fields surrounded by petrochemical plants and refineries. It is making us sick. We cannot drink the water, plant a garden, or breathe clean air.

The place I remember being so beautiful and full of life is now called Cancer Alley, which runs from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. We call it Death Alley due to the high number of community members getting sick and dying from cancer. In 2016, I was diagnosed with autoimmune hepatitis. In 2019, I was diagnosed with aluminum and lead in my body. My fruit trees no longer produce fruit. Members of my family and community say that their children have trouble breathing and they are experiencing skin rashes, nose bleeds, respiratory ailments, and cancer. I’ve lost neighbors on both sides of me to different forms of cancer. Everyone here either has cancer or knows someone with cancer. It seems like I am now heading to funerals just about every week for another neighbor or friend.

In spring of 2018, Governor John Bel Edwards announced the approval of Formosa Plastics, a \$9.4 billion dollar petrochemical facility to be built two miles from my home. Community members said it was a done deal. That did not sit well with me. In the fall of 2018, we formed RISE St. James, a faith-based organization focusing on protecting the air, water, and soil of St. James Parish from toxic industrial pollution.

Formosa Plastics would cover 2400 acres with its chemical plants right on top of the former Acadia and Buena Vista slave plantations. If Formosa is built, it will be a death sentence for St. James residents. Formosa would double air pollution in my district and triple our exposure to cancer-causing chemicals like benzene and ethylene oxide. We’ve fought all the approvals given to Formosa and stopped them. We must make sure it never gets built.

Many other toxic industries are trying to move in, but we must stop them. We are not leaving our community. We need industry to leave. They get tax breaks and we get sickness and death. And for what? All in the name of profit.

These industries are big climate polluters. I survived Hurricane Ida, but my home didn't. I watched oil spill out of a holding tank. I lived out of a trailer for many months, and I'm still working to recover and rebuild.

President Biden, the EPA, the Army Corps and other agencies should use the tools they already have to protect us. And you, Congress, could do so much by defending existing laws and passing new laws to protect communities and stop building petrochemicals and fossil fuel projects here in Saint James and everywhere.

I am here today because we are still not safe.

Once again, thank you for having me.