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Of Pollution And Environmental Racism

Inside Louisiana's horrifying 'Cancer Alley,' an 85-mile stretch of pollution and environmental racism

FEB 12, 2020, 22:42 IST



Entering Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley,' an industrial, polluted stretch of land between train tracks and a twisting river, might not be good for your health.

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Source: The Intercept (<https://theintercept.com/2017/03/24/a-louisiana-town-plagued-by-pollution-shows-why-cuts-to-the-epa-will-be-measured-in-illnesses-and-deaths/>)

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Unlike the black soot that used to linger in mining towns, here, the pollution registers quietly. It's in the oily taste of the water, on the blackened leaves of fruit trees, and in the acrid odor in the air, according to the Washington Post.

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Sources: Rolling Stone (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/louisiana-cancer-alley-getting-more-toxic-905534/>), NPR (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/03/06/583973428/after-decades-of-air-pollution-a-louisiana-town-rebels-against-a-chemical-giant>), The Nation (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>), Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/12/22/jobs-and-illness-in-petrochemical-corridor/e623deeb-c966-471e-867d-b395046726d1/>)

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**people living in Reserve, Louisiana, are 50 times more
verage American.**



Source: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>)

People's lifetime risk of cancer in St. John the Baptist, which is about 2 square miles, is 800 times higher than an average American, according to the EPA's most recent air pollution report in 2015.

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It has one petrochemical plant (<https://theintercept.com/2017/03/24/a-louisiana-town-plagued-by-pollution-shows-why-cuts-to-the-epa-will-be-measured-in-illnesses-and-deaths/>) for every 656 residents (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>).

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In total, about 150 facilities line the alley. It's the second-biggest producer of petrochemicals in the country, after Texas. But the key difference is that Texas' industry is spread out over hundreds of miles.

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Sources: Rolling Stone (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/louisiana-cancer-alley-getting-more-toxic-905534/>), Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-09-mn-2999-story.html>)

Locals live in the plants' shadows. Many see smokestacks from their windows. Others struggle to hear cicadas over the hum of machinery. Pollution wafts into houses, smelling "pungent and rotten," like "singed plastic" or "poison, according to The Intercept.

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Sources: The Intercept (<https://theintercept.com/2017/03/24/a-louisiana-town-plagued-by-pollution-shows-why-cuts-to-the-epa-will-be-measured-in-illnesses-and-deaths/>), The Nation (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>)

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People in St. Gabriel, one of the towns, no longer sit outside in the evenings, since chemicals released at night sometimes fall like yellow raindrops or "golden mist."

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Source: ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>)

Rolling Stone called it the frontline of "environmental racism," a term first used in the 1980s that refers to segregation around who gets exposed to contaminated elements.

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Source: MSNBC (<http://www.msnbc.com/interactives/geography-of-poverty/se.html>)

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Towns and cities, like St. James, Reserve, Burton Lane, Freetown, St. Gabriel, and Bayou Goula, are surrounded by petrochemical companies.

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The industrial alley's pollution is a long-term problem and concerns three groups.

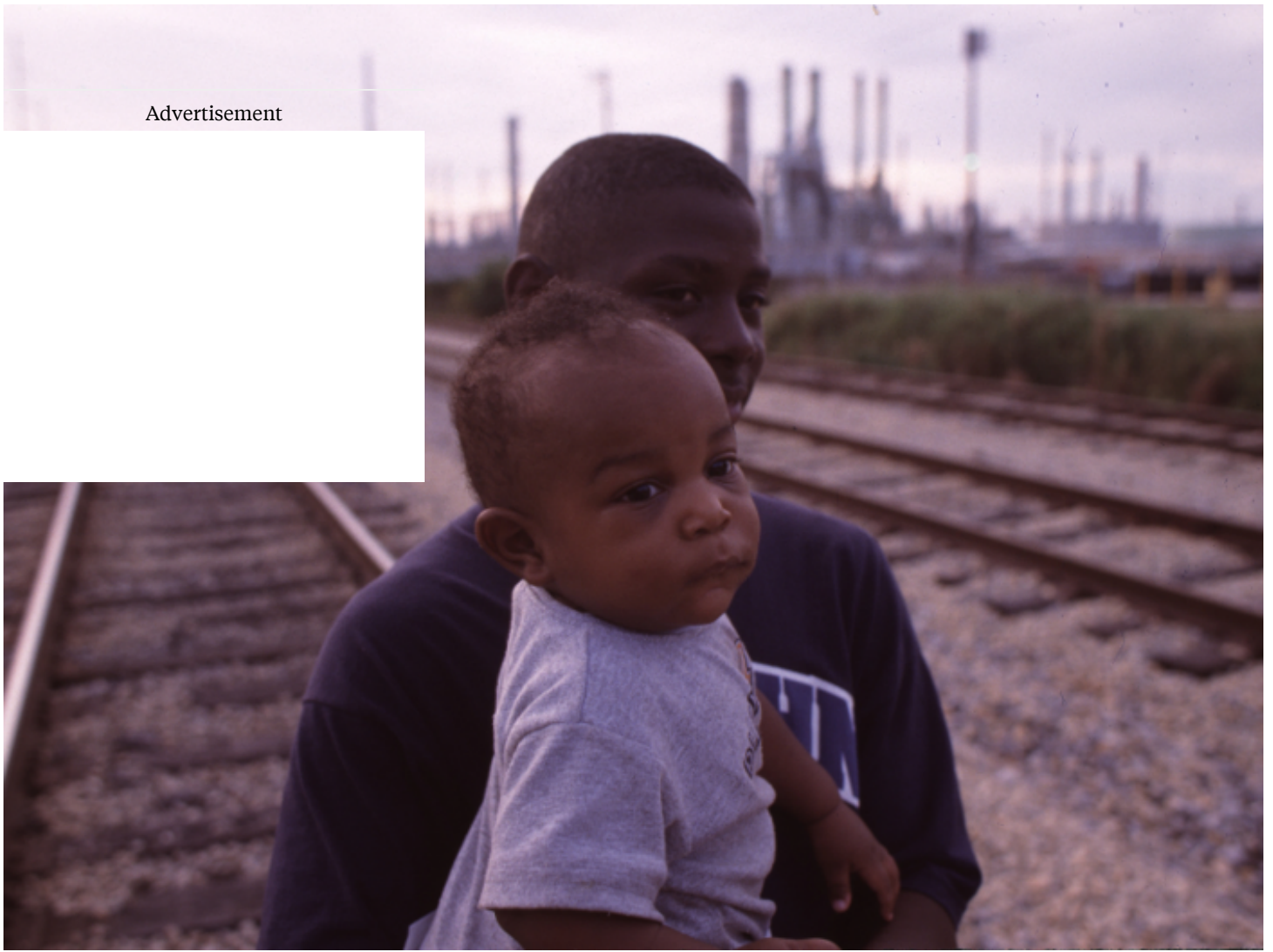


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One group includes the communities that live in the smokestacks' shadow.

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Sharon Lavigne, founder of protest group "Rise St. James," who recently changed its name to Coalition Against Death Alley, told Rolling Stone that locals can do one of three things: get sick, move away, or die.



Sources: The Nation (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>), The Intercept (<https://theintercept.com/2017/03/24/a-louisiana-town-plagued-by-pollution-shows-why-cuts-to-the-epa-will-be-measured-in-illnesses-and-deaths/>), Rolling Stone (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/louisiana-cancer-alley-getting-more-toxic-905534/>)

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Another resident and protester is Robert Taylor. He has lived in the alley his whole life. He's lost his mother, brother, sister, nephew, and several neighbors to cancer. His wife and his daughter has a rare disease that's linked to

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He told The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>) his community was the lowest-hanging fruit (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/12/louisiana-democrat-cedric-richmond-cancer-town>), and they were okay "with just wiping us out."

Reverend Dr. William J. Barber has been helping the communities fight pollution. He told Rolling Stone that the land that once held people captive as slaves now holds them captive through pollution.

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Source: Rolling Stone (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/louisiana-cancer-alley-getting-more-toxic-905534/>)

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"It is killing people by over-polluting them with toxins in their water and in their air," he said. "This is slavery of another kind.

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Source: Rolling Stone (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/louisiana-cancer-alley-getting-more-toxic-905534/>)

The second group is petrochemical companies, like Shell, Koch, Denka, and ExxonMobil. The industry has been a fixture in the area since the end of World War II, when America began to demand synthetic materials.

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Sources: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>), Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-09-mn-2999-story.html>), ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>)

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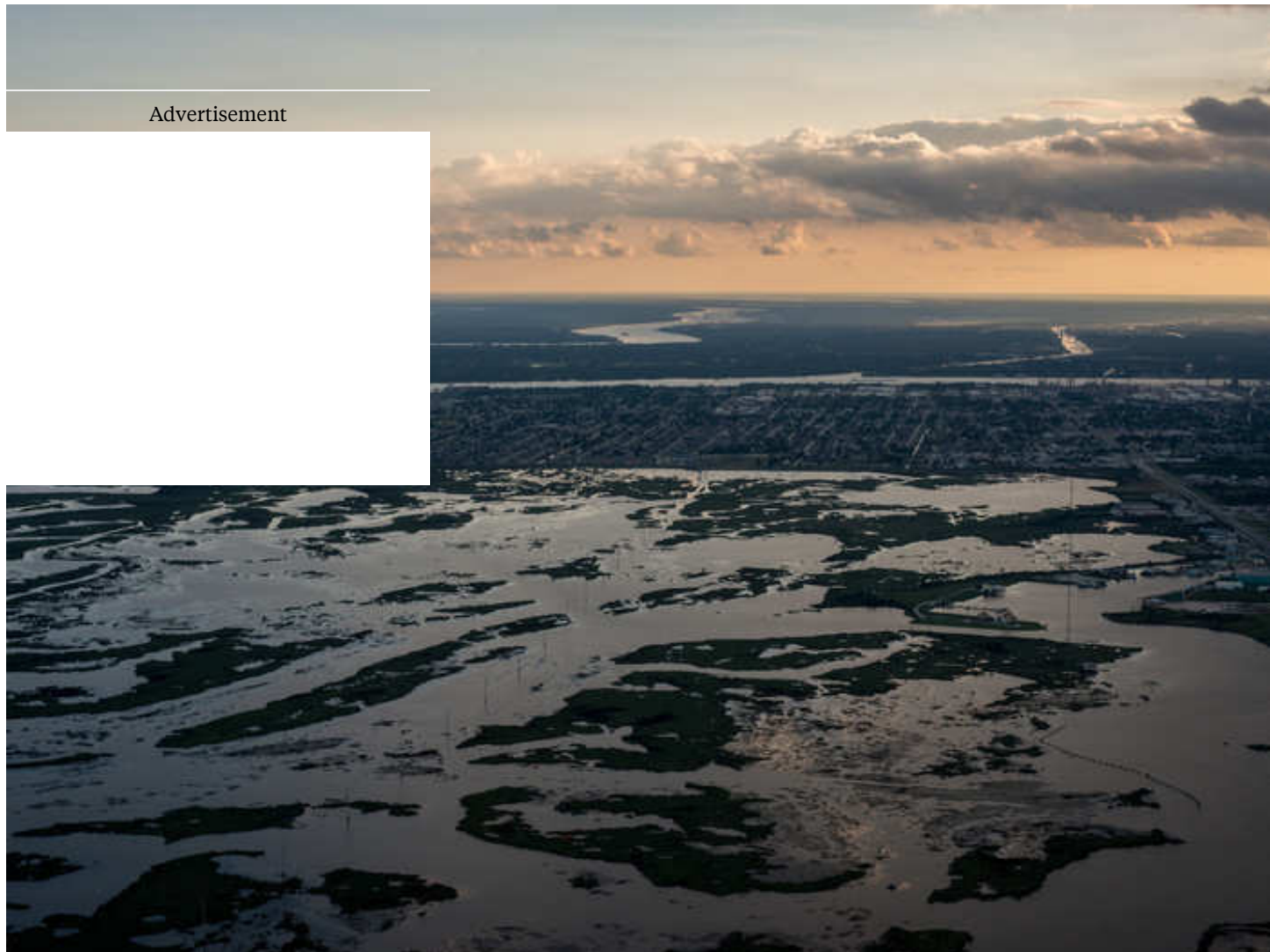
Chemical plants replaced sugar plantations. Originally, they clustered around Baton Rouge and New Orleans, but they soon began to spread out along the river. They were land and easy river access.



Sources: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>), Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-09-mn-2999-story.html>), ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>)

The companies were also looking for places with low populations. Craig Colten, a Louisiana State University geography professor told ProPublica, the black American communities they surrounded were effectively invisible.

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Source: ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>)

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Even the dead aren't left alone. Bishop cemetery, which holds the bodies of slaves and descendants from a nearby plantation, is within the grounds of the Marathon

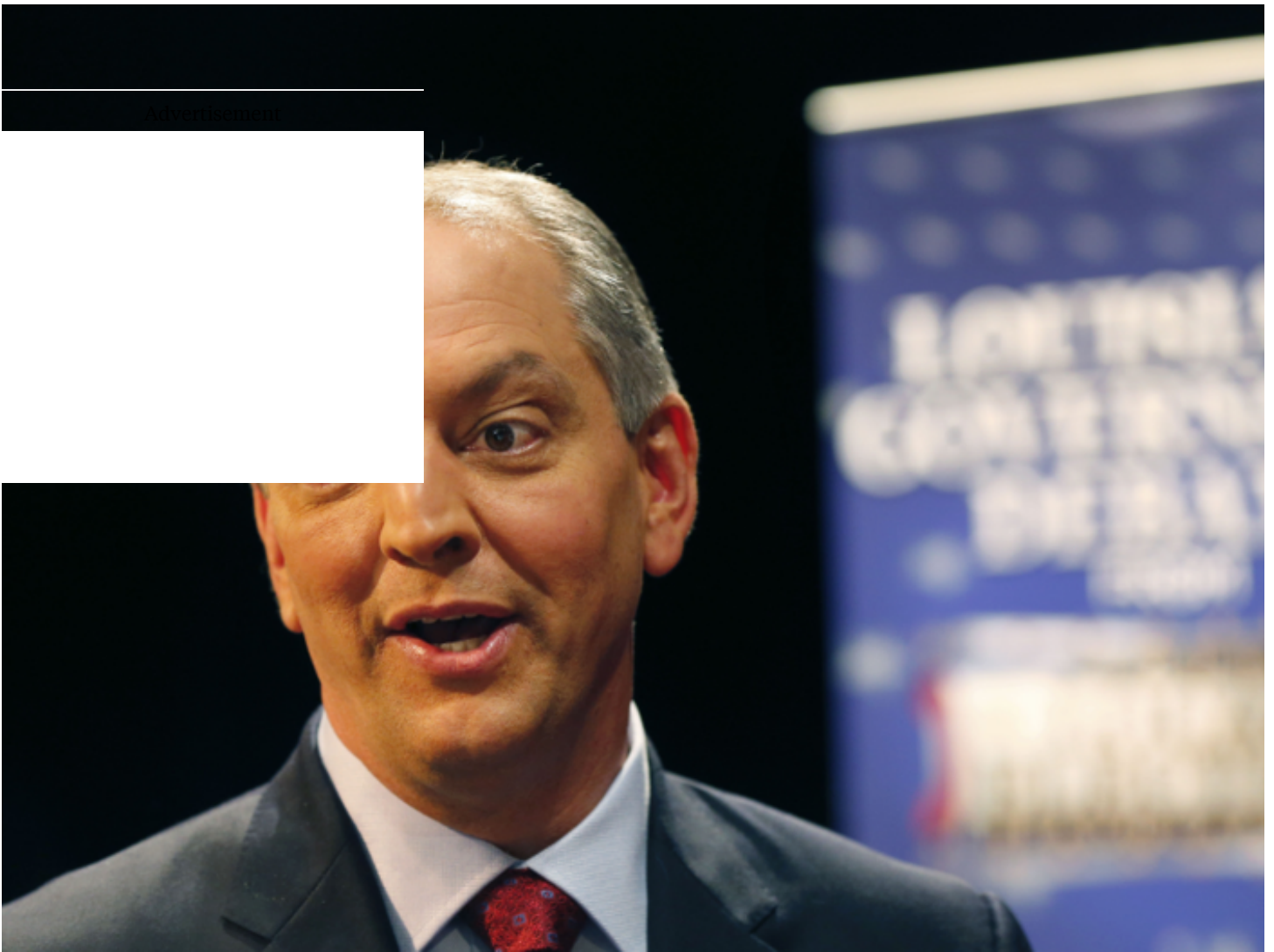
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Sources: MSNBC (<http://www.msnbc.com/interactives/geography-of-poverty/se.html>), The Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/12/22/jobs-and-illness-in-petrochemical-corridor/e623deeb-c966-471e-867d-b395046726d1/>)

Finally, there are the governing bodies. One of the reasons for the industrial boom is that Louisiana has had a tax exemption scheme, called the Industrial Tax Exemption Program, since the 1930s.



Although it was reformed by Gov. John Bel Edwards more recently so some property taxes can be imposed (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>).

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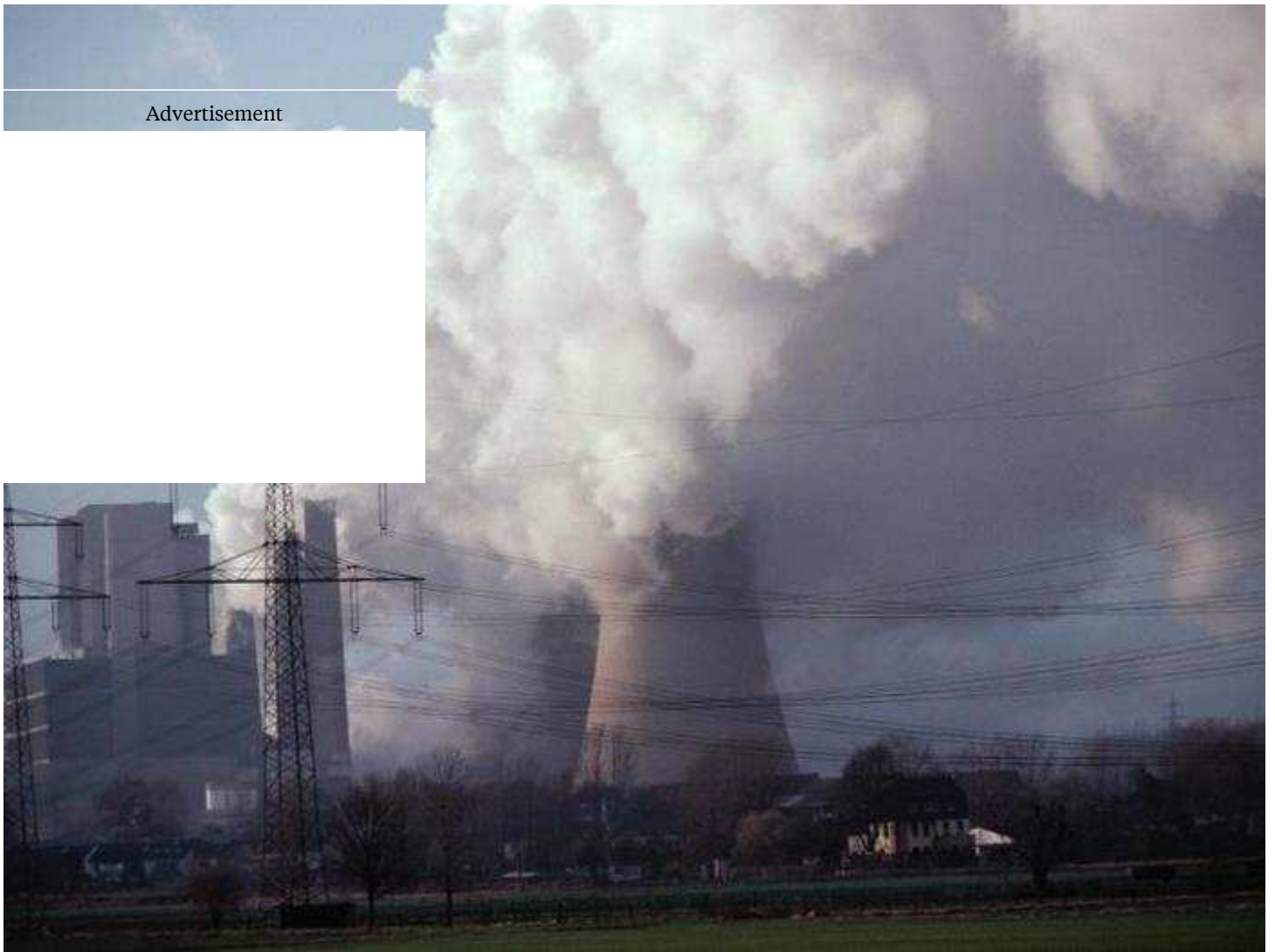
Since the 1960s, when petrochemical plants like Dow Chemical began to open, locals noticed signs of pollution, including the loss of lightning bugs.

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Source: The Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/12/22/jobs-and-illness-in-petrochemical-corridor/e623deeb-c966-471e-867d-b395046726d1/>)

In the 1970s, the area became known as America's Ruhr, because it produced 60% of America's nitrogen fertilizers and vinyl chloride, and a quarter of America's chlorine.

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Source: The Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/12/22/jobs-and-illness-in-petrochemical-corridor/e623deeb-c966-471e-867d-b395046726d1/>)

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In 1976, as Coast Guard divers tried to collect sediment samples from the Mississippi river, their hands were covered in second-degree burns.

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Source: The Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/12/22/jobs-and-illness-in-petrochemical-corridor/e623deeb-c966-471e-867d-b395046726d1/>)

In 1981, 30 grazing cows died overnight grazing near Geismer, a predominantly black town next to St. Gabriel. This caused people to start worrying about the pollution.

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Source: The Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/12/22/jobs-and-illness-in-petrochemical-corridor/e623deeb-c966-471e-867d-b395046726d1/>)

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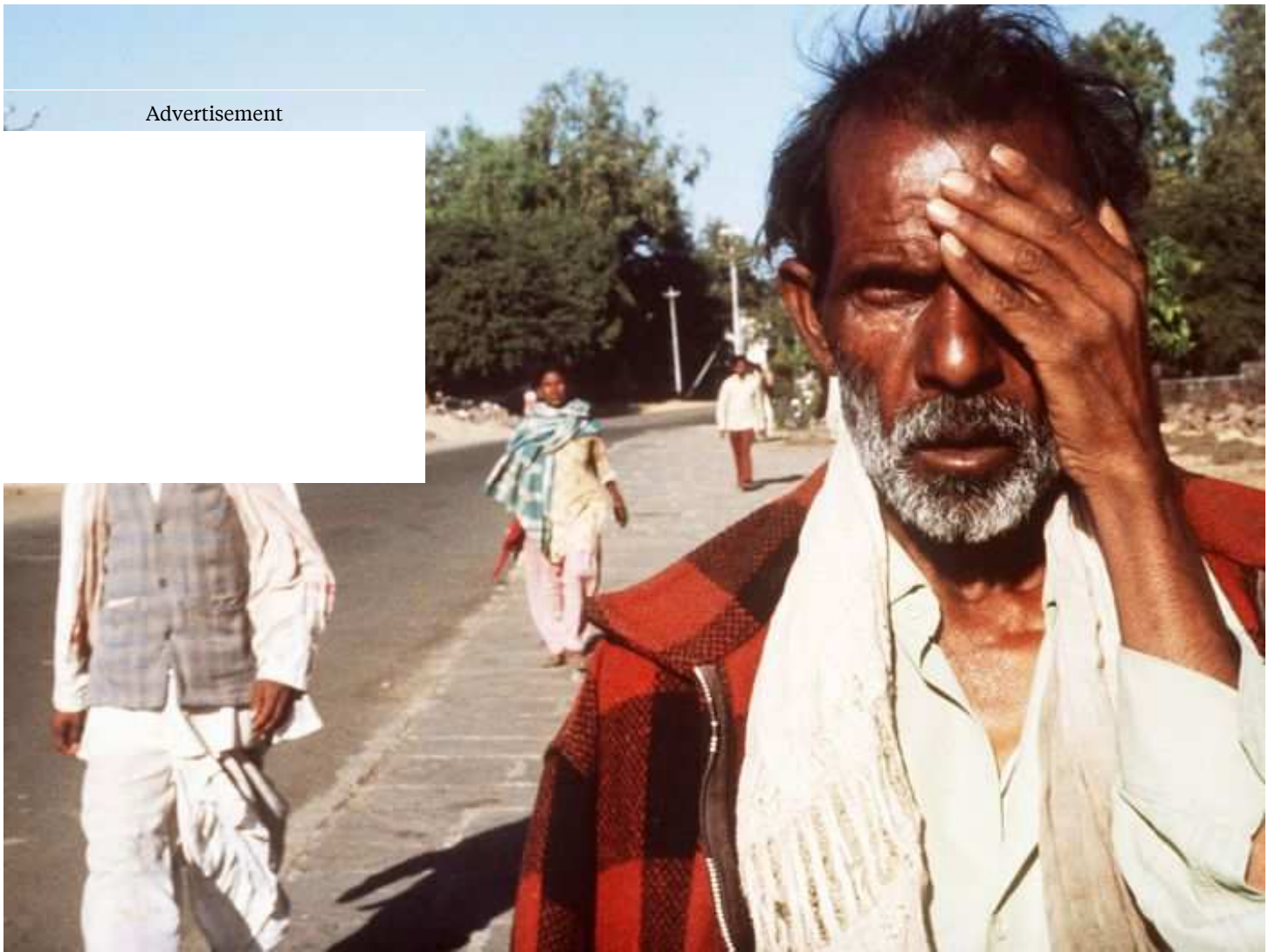
In 1986, a woman in Plaquemine was knocked off her ride-on lawnmower when Dow Chemical plant released a cloud of chlorine. She told The Washington Post, "I respect chlorine just like I respect a gun."



Sources: The Washington Post (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/12/22/jobs-and-illness-in-petrochemical-corridor/e623deeb-c966-471e-867d-b395046726d1/>), ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>)

That same year a sign was erected on the side of the road, with the question, "Bhopal on the Bayou?" This was referring to a disaster at a pesticide plant in India that killed 2,000 people when a toxic gas escaped.

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Source: The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/05/business/a-bhopal-on-the-bayou.html>)

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In 1989, the Los Angeles Times reported that, over three years, women in St. Gabriel had 75 miscarriages. It was a one-in-three ratio. The findings were contested by chemical companies.

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A spokesperson for Louisiana Chemical Association said the problem could have come from too much sexual intercourse (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-09-mn-2999-story.html>).

Still, the abortion issue received coverage, and was one of the key issues that helped boost activism from locals (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>).

By the beginning of the 1990s, there were signs, but no hard evidence. Taylor told WBUR News that while people suspected the emissions were making people ill, taking on these companies was too much. They felt powerless.



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Source: WBUR News (<https://www.wbur.org/npr/583973428/after-decades-of-air-pollution-a-louisiana-town-rebels-against-a-chemical-giant>)

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The contrast in power between petrochemical companies and locals is stark. Residents of St. John earn on average \$17,000. Whilst the chemical sector generates \$80 billion for Louisiana every year

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Source: The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/opinion/sunday/epa-carniogens.html>), The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>)

One example of a harmful chemical is chloroprene, a colorless gas. For 47 years, DuPont produced it. Chloroprene is used as a base for neoprene. Neoprene is used to make wetsuits, gaskets, and hoses.

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Sources: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>), The Intercept (<https://theintercept.com/2017/03/24/a-louisiana-town-plagued-by-pollution-shows-why-cuts-to-the-epa-will-be-measured-in-illnesses-and-deaths/>)

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The invisible gas induces headaches, rashes, and heart palpitations, weakens immune systems, and causes stomach and kidney problems. But no one could definitively say how dangerous chloroprene was.

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Sources: NPR (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/03/06/583973428/after-decades-of-air-pollution-a-louisiana-town-rebels-against-a-chemical-giant>), The Nation (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>)

...even though The Guardian found a 1956 DuPont technical manual that described the dangers of chloroprene.

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The manual said it could enter the body through skin or inhalation, and high concentrations would cause "depression of the central nervous system and damage to vital organs."

When The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>) requested comment DuPont said it was Denka which now produced chloroprene, since it had sold production.

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The Guardian also reported that Dupont experimented with chloroprene on rats in 1971, exposure.



In 1999, the International Agency for Research on Cancer classified chloroprene as "possibly carcinogenic to humans."

Six years later, in 2005, the National Toxicology Program's Report on Carcinogens described as "reasonably anticipated (<https://theintercept.com/2017/03/24/a-louisiana-town-plagued-by-pollution-shows-why-cuts-to-the-epa-will-be-measured-in-illnesses-and-deaths/>)" to be carcinogenic.

Still, no correlation between the emissions and locals' health was established. The state was strapped for resources, and couldn't afford to research it. There wasn't even enough money to properly monitor the chemical plants.

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Source: Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-05-09-mn-2999-story.html>)

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In the early 2000s, New Sarpy, another town in the alley, was in the media. New Sarpy was bordered by Orion Refining Corp, which burned off about 772 tons of sulfur dioxide between 1999 and 2001.

Sources: Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jun-22-na-sons22-story.html>), Herald Tribune (<https://www.heraldtribune.com/article/LK/20020922/News/605239363/SH>)

Residents felt the effects of the pollution. Resident Dorothy Jenkins' oranges turned black in her backyard. She said it was so bad she sometimes had to put her head in the fridge to breathe.

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Sources: Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jun-22-na-sons22-story.html>), Herald Tribune (<https://www.heraldtribune.com/article/LK/20020922/News/605239363/SH>)

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In 2001, Orion had a big fire, prompting locals to visit former Sen. John B. Breaux for his help. But he had different priorities, and had one of his staff take the meeting.



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Between 1998 and 2000, he wrote to the EPA five times asking for it to delay compliance with federal pollution standards. The EPA agreed.

Source: Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jun-22-na-sons22-story.html>)

In 2001, Orion hired his son John Breaux Jr. as a lobbyist. By 2003, the senator's son had been paid at least \$120,000. The sign says "land sharks" because Orion was gradually expanding closer and closer to the town.

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Sources: Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jun-22-na-sons22-story.html>), Herald Tribune (<https://www.heraldtribune.com/article/LK/20020922/News/605239363/SH>)

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The EPA did investigate Orion for failing to comply with air pollution requirements when upgrading plants. But its investigation was weakened when Breaux pushed for former President George W Bush's administration to take it easy on air pollution rules

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Source: Los Angeles Times (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jun-22-na-sons22-story.html>)

Louisiana's air pollution regulations didn't help. Unlike Texas, the state doesn't measure air pollution in areas near polluters, only in the air around plants.

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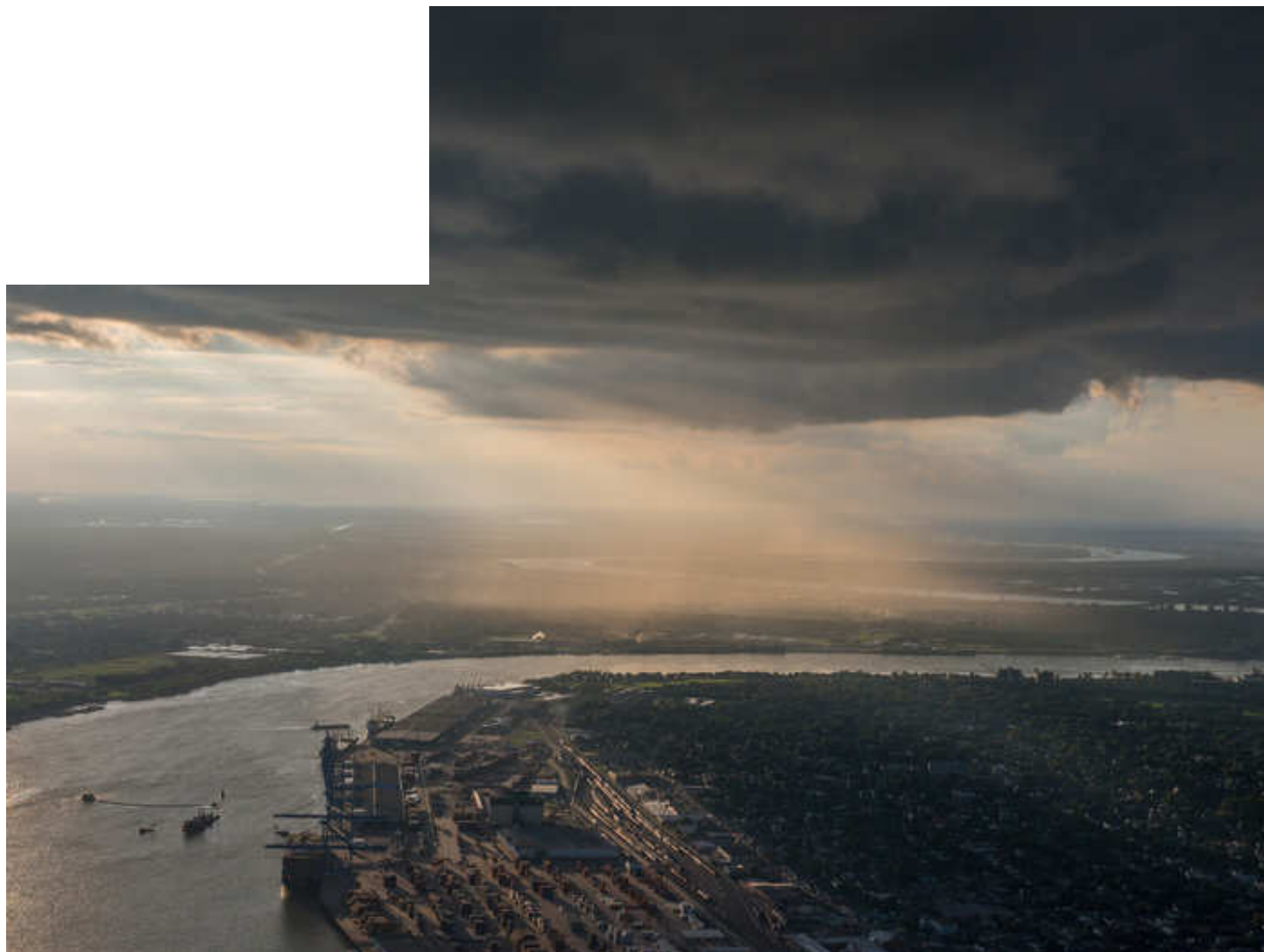


Another thing that could harm an accurate measurement is that Louisiana measures only one chemical at a time (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>).

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Some pollution measurements have improved. The EPA requires plants that are emitting over a certain threshold to report it. Unlike the national trend, which was a 16% decrease over the last 30 years, plants in Cancer Alley reported toxic releases

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Source: ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>)

On the health side of things, researcher Wilma Subra told The Nation it was difficult to demonstrate increased cancer rates because the tumor registry used to only report data on parish levels. This made it impossible to measure differences within parishes.

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Another thing that skewed records was that anyone who had insurance often got treatment for their cancer outside of the state, skewing where the cancer was reported (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>).

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What worries locals is that the chemical industry continues to grow. Since 2015, seven new petrochemical facilities have been approved, which the EPA said would be "major sources" of air pollution. Another five await approval.

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Source: ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/article/welcome-to-cancer-alley-where-toxic-air-is-about-to-get-worse>)

In December 2015, The EPA released a report on toxic air. It showed that the 10,000 residents were at a much higher risk of harm from the pollution.



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Sources: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>), The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/opinion/sunday/epa-carniogens.html>)

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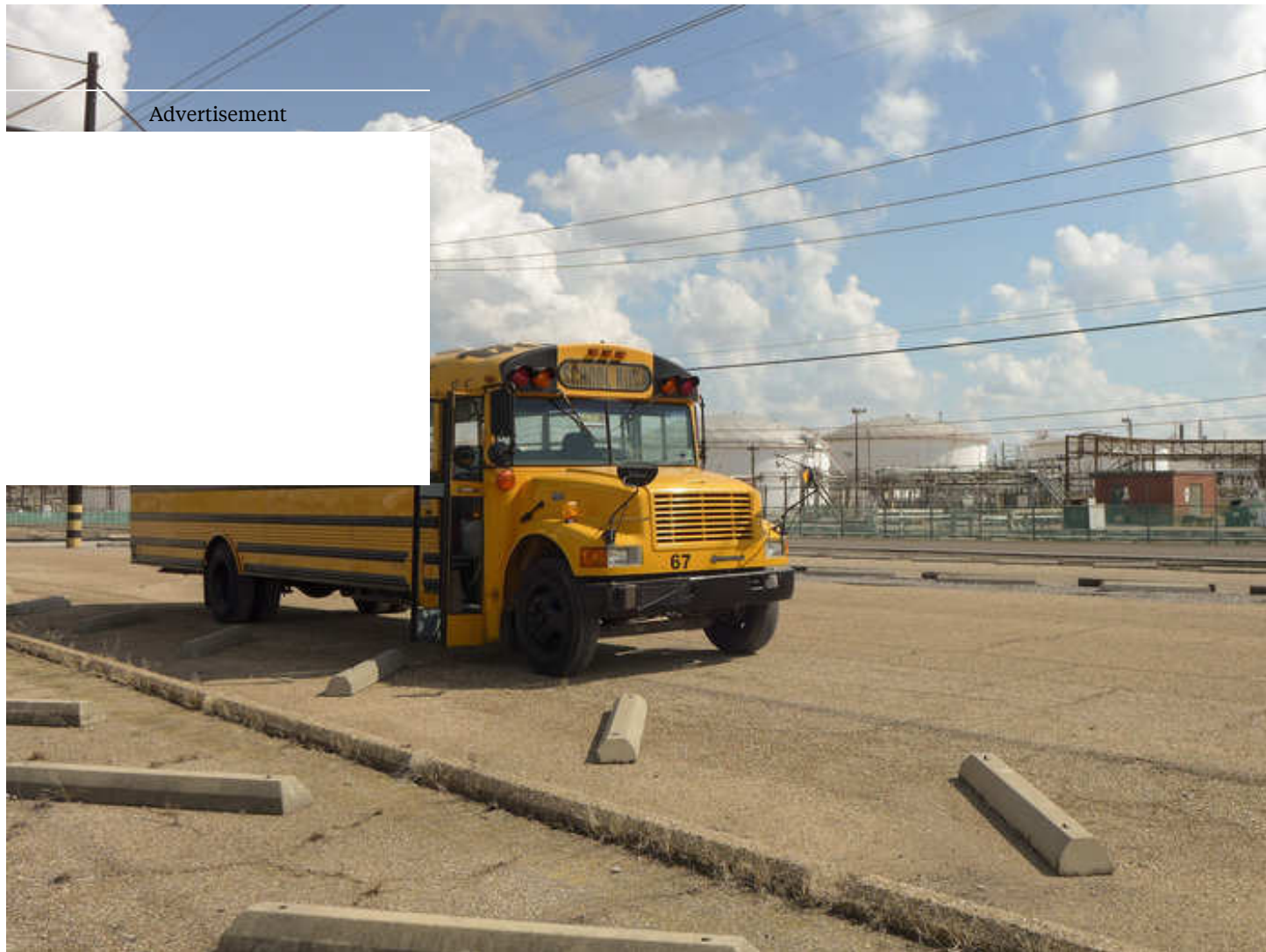
Despite the findings, nothing changed.

In an opinion piece for The New York Times, environmental reporter Sharon Lerner wrote, "But as the people of St. John soon learned, though lawmakers can use the risk levels from IRIS to legally limit chemicals, set levels at federal cleanup sites or shutter factories that emit them, they don't have to do any of those things."

Source: The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/opinion/sunday/epa-carniogens.html>)

Examples of pollution continue. In November 2017, Fifth Ward elementary school, which had 400 students, had Chloroprene levels 755 times above EPA guidelines.

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Source: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>)

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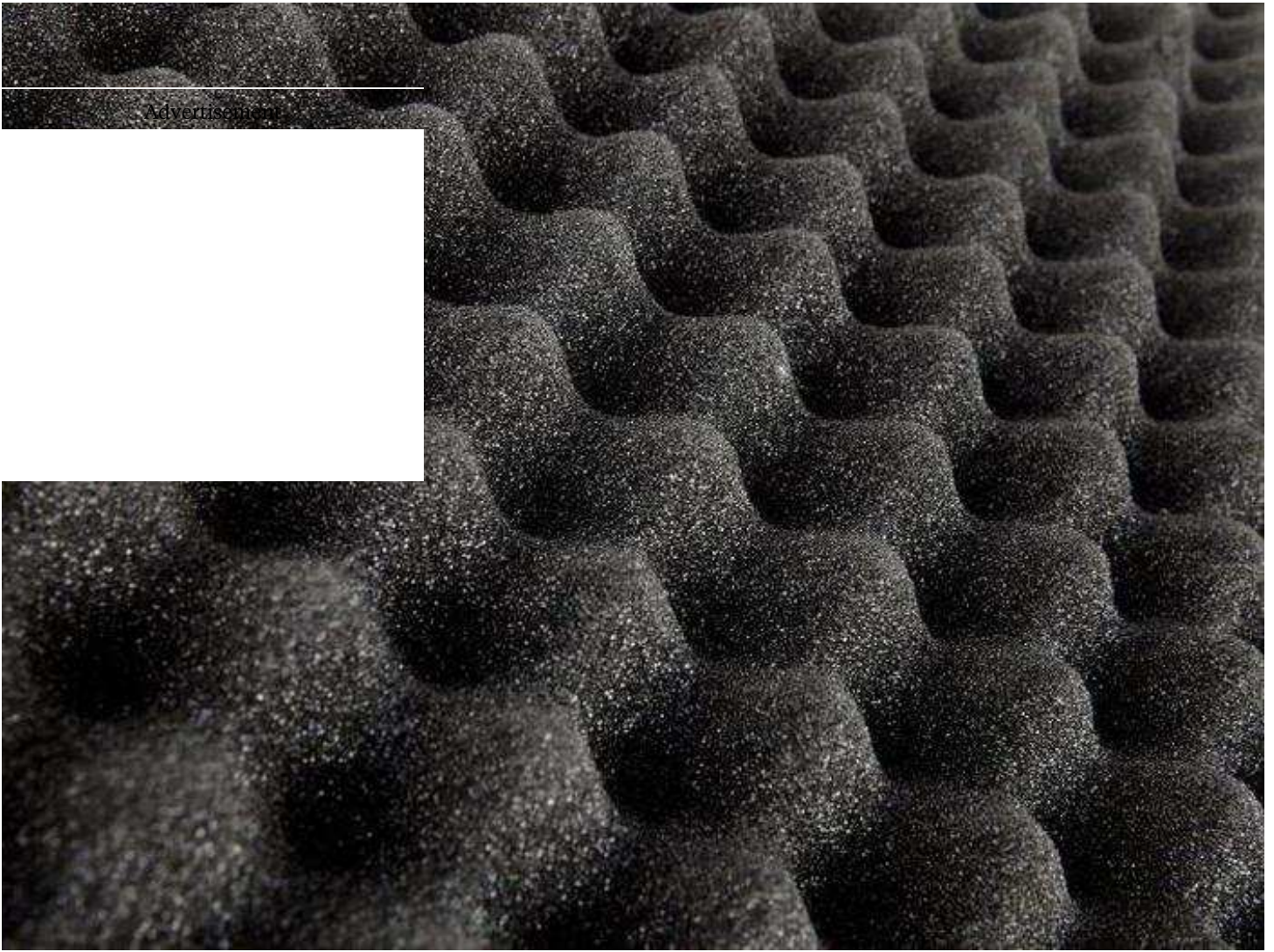
In 2018, Governor John Bel Edwards announced Formosa Plastics planned on opening a \$9.4 billion industrial factory, with 14 plants across 2,300 acres in St. James Parish. The plant would create plastic bottles and grocery bags and would double toxic

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Source: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/18/louisiana-pollution-petrochemical-site-sunshine-project>), The Nation (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>)

Across the river, Wanhua Chemical Group plans to build a \$1.25 billion plant over 250 acres to produce a plastic that's used to make polyurethane foam, for furniture and beds.



But in August, the company announced the project was under review, and that another location was under review.

According to The Advocate (https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_4c2cf60c-ca51-11e9-a233-c7e3236b79fc.html), while the reason for the review wasn't clarified, the company had previously expressed concern over President Donald Trump's trade war with China.

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In 2019, Hampton and Taylor visited their Congressman Cedric Richmond for his help. Richmond spoke with them for two days, urged them to vote against President Trump, and they write a letter to the chemical plant.



Source: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/12/louisiana-democrat-cedric-richmond-cancer-town>)

As for Chloroprene, in 2019, EPA regional director David Gray told citizens that he thought it was unlikely the EPA would ever set a legally enforceable standard for chloroprene.

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"The fact of the matter is there is a sole source of chloroprene in the United States and it's here," he said (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>).

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In August 2019, the Louisiana health officials announced it would conduct a door-to-door inquiry into how many people had developed cancer. This could help with health records, but it is a small victory.

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Source: Mother Jones (<https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2019/11/health-officials-in-cancer-alley-will-study-if-living-near-a-controversial-chemical-plant-causes-cancer/>)

As recently as June, the risk of cancer in the area was up to 1,505 cancer cases per million people, nearly 50 times the national average. Lavigne told Rolling Stone, "We are boxed in from all sides by plants, tank farms, and noisy railroad tracks. We live in constant fear."

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Sources: House Document (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF18/20191120/110247/HHRG-116-IF18-Wstate-LavigneS-20191120.pdf>), The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/opinion/sunday/epa-carniogens.html>), Rolling Stone (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/louisiana-cancer-alley-getting-more-toxic-905534/>)

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The countless smokestacks and the continuing struggle to be heard makes locals question whether it's worth fighting, or time to up and leave. Like Lavigne said, it is one

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Sources: MSNBC (<http://www.msnbc.com/interactives/geography-of-poverty/se.html>), ProPublica (<https://projects.propublica.org/louisiana-toxic-air/>), The Nation (<https://www.thenation.com/article/st-james-louisiana-plastic-petrochemicals-buy-out/>), The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/opinion/sunday/epa-carniogens.html>),

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(<https://www.businessinsider.in/tech/news/a-leg-lengthening-surgeon-says-software-engineers-from-big-tech-firms-like-google-amazon-microsoft-and-meta-are-paying-at-least-75000-to-get-3-inches-taller/articleshow/94231046.cms>)



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(<https://www.businessinsider.in/business/ecommerce/news/iphone-13-series-iphone-12-mini-and-iphone-11-to-get-huge-price-cut-on-flipkart-upcoming-sale/articleshow/94215527.cms>)

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