

Advocates for Environmental Human Rights • Bayou Grace Community Services •
Bayou Interfaith Shared Community Organizing • Boat People SOS •
Center for Fair Housing Inc • Deep South Center for Environmental Justice •
Disaster Accountability Project • Federation of Southern Cooperatives •
Greater Birmingham Ministries • Gulf Restoration Network • GURLS for Life Inc. •
Immaculate Heart Community CDC • Justice and Witness Ministries •
LEADERSHIP Counts! • Louisiana Bucket Brigade •
Louisiana Environmental Action Network • Mary Queen of Vietnam CDC •
Mississippi Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities • Moving Forward Gulf Coast Inc •
Natural Resources Defense Council • North Gulfport Community Land Trust •
Oxfam America • Sierra Club • t.e.j.a.s • Tri-Coastal Community Outreach Inc.

June 15, 2010

Administrator Lisa Jackson
Environmental Protection Agency
Ariel Rios Building
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20460

cc: Janet McCabe, Office of Air and Radiation, USEPA
Maria L. Martinez, Air Quality Analysis Section (6PD-Q)

Dear Administrator Jackson,

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to protecting the people and resources of the Gulf Coast from environmental hazards, including those associated with the BP oil disaster. We appreciate that you have come down several times in recent weeks to the Gulf to hear community concerns, and we also appreciate your efforts to respond to issues we have raised about the EPA air quality monitoring.

We do have continuing concerns about gaps in the air quality monitoring being conducted in the Gulf Coast. As the duration of this environmental and public health disaster continues, it is essential that there be comprehensive monitoring that captures the full spectrum of short-term and longer-term health risks. EPA must redouble its efforts to work with communities to ensure that air quality monitoring is responsive to local concerns and that the findings are communicated effectively.

Oil spill-impacted communities have been experiencing odors and health complaints consistent with exposure to oil spill chemicals. At the same time, EPA is reporting “typical” air quality for the areas monitored. This disconnect reflects gaps in the current monitoring and communication plans employed by EPA that must be remedied. To that end, we make the following recommendations:

Improve Response to Community Complaints by Creating a Rapid Response Team and NGO / University / EPA Collaborative

Oil spill-impacted communities have been experiencing odors and health complaints and not receiving adequate attention. EPA should be responding to these complaints as quickly as possible to conduct the appropriate monitoring and communicate the results. To facilitate this, EPA should dedicate a portion of its website to providing information on how to report a complaint, locate the results of any monitoring conducted in response to a complaint, and related relevant information on odors and health effects.

We appreciate the offers made by EPA staff on the ground in Louisiana to provide cell phone numbers that citizens can call when they smell odors. However, this response is dependent upon the good will of the EPA employees on the scene and does not constitute a long-term plan. To ensure a continued plan for complaint response we recommend:

1. Creation of an EPA Rapid Response Team that responds to calls from citizens.

Local residents would be given a phone number and EPA staff or contractors would respond promptly to investigate and conduct the needed sampling. EPA would turn around the results quickly and provide callers with a report of the results as soon as feasible.

2. Working With Communities on an Environmental Health Action Plan

We invite EPA to partner with us and other non-profit environmental groups and local universities to develop additional methods for documenting problems, communicating risk, and recommending interim solutions. This collaboration could include an environmental health action plan for the region that includes documentation of community experiences as part of the data necessary to understanding the impact of the disaster. We believe it is important to work together.

Expand Monitoring to Include Semi-Volatile Organic Compounds (SVOCs)

In addition to the Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) being currently measured, crude oil contains SVOCs which both can cause odors and are linked to long-term health impacts. Comprehensive onshore monitoring should include testing for these compounds in areas most likely to be impacted by oil spill fumes. The results of this monitoring should be made publicly available for compounds with associated health risks and those with low odor thresholds. Currently, SVOC data is only available from monitoring sites in Region 4 and only for a limited suite of compounds. Expanding this monitoring to the mostly highly impacted areas of Region 6 is urgently needed.

Monitor Wind Patterns to Estimate Most Impacted Areas

Meteorological data on wind conditions and weather patterns should be assessed to evaluate the degree to which existing fixed monitoring stations are capturing the areas of highest impact. The results of this assessment should be updated regularly and posted on the website. In the event this modeling reveals areas of potential impact that are not included in the current monitoring network, EPA should develop an expanded monitoring plan to address these areas.

Obtain all Relevant Data on Pollutant Releases

Efficient and comprehensive monitoring plans would be greatly assisted by accurate and complete information on the location and quantity of pollutant releases. This should include up-to-date monitoring of the spill and also all applications of dispersants. In particular, the location, quantity, and application method for all airborne dispersant applications should be reported to the public. This information can inform onshore air monitoring and the development of offshore buffer zones to keep clean-up workers and communities safe.

Ensure Public Disclosure of Monitoring Data

All data collected on air quality, both offshore and onshore, should be made public regardless of where it originated. EPA is the agency best suited to be a clearinghouse for this data and make it available to the public. We strongly encourage EPA to seek out the data being collected by other entities and agencies and make this information available to the public on its website. This should include information on both the oil-related compounds and the dispersants. It is essential that the public and medical providers in particular, have access to health-relevant information on all chemicals released into the environment. We greatly appreciate the fact that EPA made the ingredients in the dispersant products publicly available. Data are also needed on the chemical make-up of the crude oil and oil-dispersant mixture.

Communicate Monitoring Results Effectively

The scope of this monitoring effort is daunting and we appreciate the efforts of EPA staff and contractors who are working to collect the data and make it available to the public. However, the current presentation of the data on the website is confusing and difficult to access.

We recommend that the website be improved to facilitate queries by specific location. Also, all data files should include enough information to enable a user to determine what was sampled, where it was sampled (latitude, longitude, city, county, state), when it was sampled (date and time), what method was used for the sample collection and analysis, and the relevant limits of detection.

The presentation of the monitoring results should also be improved to better respond to community concerns and achieve environmental justice. For example, the monitoring results do not adequately address spikes that could result in significant odor exposures but average out over time. Also, EPA's extrapolation of regional air quality from a limited number of fixed monitoring stations fails to account for localized hotspots. The conclusion that "air quality is normal for this time of year" is not supported by empirical data since this is the first time that monitoring of this scope for air toxics has taken place in the region. When personal experience (smelling odors during the spikes) is at odds with EPA's assessment, community members lose trust in the agency. EPA's communication of the monitoring results should reflect an honest assessment of the situation and include explicit recognition of the limitations inherent in the sampling results. We recommend that EPA's website include language such as the following:

The EPA has a robust monitoring plan in place. However, we cannot be in every place at one time. The results we post are results for those areas only and cannot be extrapolated to the entire region. If you smell an odor please call our Rapid Response Team immediately.

In addition, the EPA should conduct community forums to explain the monitoring efforts and results to community members. Such forums should be conducted in collaboration with local community and environmental groups and should include presenters from relevant agencies, local universities, and outside experts.

Given the scope of this disaster, we understand the challenges your staff face, and we appreciate the hard work being conducted to collect information and communicate it to the public. The recommendations included in this letter, if enacted, will greatly improve the monitoring and communication of health risks associated with the oil spill. Thank you for your commitment to air quality monitoring in the Gulf Coast and we look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure the protection of all communities.

Sincerely,

Miriam Rotkin-Ellman MPH, Staff Scientist
Gina Solomon MD MPH, Senior Scientist
Al Huang, Environmental Justice Attorney
Natural Resources Defense Council

Anne Rolfes, Founding Director
Louisiana Bucket Brigade
New Orleans, LA

Earthea Nance, PhD, PE, CFM Faculty Associate, CHART
University of New Orleans
New Orleans, LA

Wilma Subra, PhD
Marylee M. Orr, Executive Director
Louisiana Environmental Action Network

Paul Orr
Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper

Teresa Bettis, Executive Director
Center for Fair Housing, Inc
Mobile, AL

Jeffrey Buchanan
Oxfam America

Juan Parras
t.e.j.a.s.
Houston, Texas

Glenda Perryman, Executive Director
Immaculate Heart Community Development Corporation, Inc.
Lucedale, Mississippi

Sharon S. Gauthé, BISCO Director
BISCO (Bayou Interfaith Shared Community Organizing)
Thibodaux, LA

Carol McGilvray, Executive Director
Rose Johnson, Founder
North Gulfport Community Land Trust
Gulfport, MS

Natasha Cameron-Boyd, Executive Director
GURLS for Life, Inc. (Growing Up Responsibly to Lady Status)
Moss Point, MS

Mary Troupe, Executive Director
Mississippi Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities

Diem Nguyen, Executive Director
Mary Queen of Viet Nam, Comm. Develop Corp.
New Orleans, LA

Sherrie Graham
LEADERSHIP Counts! Mobile, AL

Courtney Howell, Executive Director
Bayou Grace Community Services
Chauvin, LA

Carolyn Thompson, Executive Director
Tri-Coastal Community Outreach
Grand Bay, AL

Scott Douglas, Executive Director
Greater Birmingham Ministries
Birmingham, AL

John Zippert

Federation of Southern Cooperatives
Rural Training and Research Center
Epes, Alabama

Grace M. Scire, Gulf Coast Development Director
Boat People- SOS
Bayou La Batre, AL
Biloxi, MS
New Orleans, LA

Cynthia Sarthou, Executive Director
Gulf Restoration Network

Rev. Jim Deming, Minister for Environmental Justice
Justice and Witness Ministries
United Church of Christ
Cleveland, Ohio

Rosa Herrin, Advocacy Programs Coordinator
Moving Forward Gulf Coast, Inc.
Slidell, LA

Rose Murray
Elizabeth Etherton
Alexander F. Tilton
Tulane University Law School
JD Candidate, 2012

Sarah Minge
Charlotte, NC

Ben Smilowitz, Executive Director
Disaster Accountability Project

Courtney Halwig, Legal Intern
Advocates for Environmental Human Rights
New Orleans, LA

Dr. Beverly Wright, Director
Mary I. Williams, M.Ed., Program Manager for Community Outreach
Deep South Center for Environmental Justice

Michael Brune, Executive Director
Haywood Martin, Delta Chapter Chair
Sierra Club