

# NEWS RELEASE

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For Information:  
David Bond, 802 375 3013 [dbond@bennington.edu](mailto:dbond@bennington.edu)  
Frandelle Gerard, [fgerard@chantvi.org](mailto:fgerard@chantvi.org)  
Sommer Sibilly, [sommer@goodfoodvi.org](mailto:sommer@goodfoodvi.org)  
Jennifer Valiulis, [jvaliulis@stxenvironmental.org](mailto:jvaliulis@stxenvironmental.org)

## **New Survey to Gather Information from Residents Impacted by Limetree Oil Refinery**

Residents of St. Croix are being urged to fill out a new community survey on the environmental and health impacts of the troubled restart of the Limetree (HOVENSA) refinery in St. Croix, USVI.

Responding to community concerns, this survey will gather local information about the emissions and petrochemical releases from the Limetree refinery in the past six months. This information will provide a preliminary measure and a map of the impact Limetree is having on the homes, gardens, water cisterns and health of residents of St. Croix.

The survey can be accessed online at: [www.bennington.edu/Limetree](http://www.bennington.edu/Limetree). The survey has been designed and organized by Dr. David Bond (a professor from Bennington College in Vermont), Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT), St. Croix Environmental Association (SEA), and VI Good Food Coalition. Local volunteers will be taking the survey door-to-door and will be outside stores in the coming days. All adult residents of St. Croix are encouraged to complete the survey. It takes about 4 minutes to complete. The deadline for completing the survey is July 9, 2021.

“We are calling on all residents of St. Croix to help us better understand the impacts of Limetree. The past few months have witnessed a series of operational failures and accidental releases that have affected the wellbeing of St. Croix. Limetree’s refusal to operate fence-line monitoring equipment means the burden of documenting these impact now falls to citizens themselves. It is troubling that it has come to this, but we will not shy away from the urgent task at hand: drawing together the rich insights of the community in order to advance a more honest accounting of Limetree’s impact on the environment and health of St. Croix,” said David Bond, Professor at Bennington College and Associate Director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA).

The Limetree/HOVENSA refinery has a long history of environmental neglect on St. Croix. Once the largest refinery in world, the facility closed abruptly in 2012 after being fined and required to spend \$700 million to address decades of routine contamination of the islands air and groundwater. Sidestepping environmental law for restarting refineries, the Trump Administration permitted Limetree to come back online without first addressing damaged infrastructure and outstanding fines. After nearly a decade of being closed, Limetree resumed operation in January.

St. Croix is an environmental justice community. It is well-documented that poor communities of color often bear an outsized burden of the nation’s pollution problems, a trend identified as environmental racism. To help rectify this, the EPA and others have committed to bringing extra vigilance to vulnerable populations to ensure their environmental well-being. These sensible safeguards are not yet been fully implemented in St. Croix, and Limetree is currently disputing designating St. Croix as an environmental justice community.

“In the aftermath of a series of incidences at the refinery, people residing and working on the western quadrant of St. Croix expressed their concerns on social media, talk radio and print media covering the events. This survey will be the first community based, data collection effort that is of, for and by the people. Information is power and our community deserves accurate unbiased data,” said Frandelle Gerard, Executive Director of the Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT).

The restart Limetree refinery has faced many operational challenges, as has been well-documented in local and national news. On several occasions in the past six months, the refinery has released petrochemical mists, sulphurous emissions, and hydrocarbon smoke into neighborhoods around the refinery.

Yet very little is known about these accidental releases as mandated monitoring systems were not installed nor operational when they occurred. This lapse of oversight by the EPA and the Virgin Islands agencies needs to be improved. Nor, in the wake of these accidents, has there been any comprehensive attempt to investigate the contents and extent of these chemical releases. Residents are frustrated by these unnecessary voids in our understanding of how refinery restart is impacting St. Croix.

“As we talk about the impact of the environmental incidents and the noxious odor on our community and environment, I am increasingly concerned about the potential impact on our locally grown food and our producers. Historically farmers in this community have been overlooked when it comes to disaster and disaster recovery. The fact is, a significant number of farms are situated in the west and northwest of the refinery placing them squarely in the range of the incident pattern. No one is really talking about that. There are processes for remediating roofs and cars and cisterns. Who is checking our food, our soil, and our groundwater? As a non-profit whose work focuses on Food Security, Sovereignty and Sustainability, it is imperative that we ask these questions,” said Sommer Sibilly, Executive Director of the VI Good Food Coalition.

This survey will be the first systematic investigation into the full extent of Limetree’s impacts of residents. Moving beyond personal anecdote and individual complaints, this survey is the first comprehensive accounting of the full breadth of impacts from Limetree.

The easiest way to take the short survey is to go online: [www.bennington.edu/Limetree](http://www.bennington.edu/Limetree). All individual information submitted to the survey is confidential and will not be shared, but the aggregate trends will be summarized at a neighborhood level and made available to the public, elected leaders, and federal agencies. These findings will also orient further environmental research towards areas where residents have experienced heavy impacts, including analyzing soil and water samples for petrochemical contamination. These findings will also provide insight into where monitoring stations should be located.

“Many people reached out to us, to the EPA, and even to Limetree about the ways they were affected by the refinery’s recent operations and accidents. This study was initiated in response to their concerns. The scientific insight gained by collecting comprehensive, unbiased data on the distribution and the nature of the refinery’s impacts, will guide the way forward in ensuring accountability,” said Jennifer Valiulis, Executive Director of the St. Croix Environmental Association (SEA).

The lapse of effective oversight and the resulting gaps in scientific monitoring data at Limetree have allowed some officials to downplay and dismiss resident’s concerns. During recent flaring episodes, some residents struggled to breath under the assault of noxious emissions from the refinery. Others went to the hospital. Residents have voiced real concerns about finding petrochemicals in their cisterns and gardens.

Taking these concerns seriously, the goal of this survey is to gather the knowledge residents already have about Limetree and give that knowledge greater visibility in ongoing discussions. Such knowledge is key to democratic decision making.

Due to the problems that accompanied the Limetree refinery restart, the EPA has paused all refining operations at the facility for 60 days. The 60 days expire on July 14, 2021. As the community contemplates the future of St. Croix and the refinery during this pause, it is vital to have a more comprehensive understanding of the impact the refinery has had on residents.

“Whether you’ve smelled sulphurous gases or had a headache or eye irritation, whether you’ve found an oily film in your cistern or on your vegetables or on your car, whether you’ve had trouble breathing or whether you’ve experienced no impacts at all, we want to hear from you. Please grab your cell phone, go online, and take four minutes to fill out this survey. The success of this survey depends on your participation,” said David Bond.

One challenge to conducting a project like this is getting the word out. Community members are encouraged to widely share this survey to their family and friends. The deadline for filling out the questionnaire is July 9, 2021.

If residents have questions about the questionnaire or would like to receive a paper copy, they should contact Dr. David Bond at (802) 440.4324 or email [dbond@bennington.edu](mailto:dbond@bennington.edu).