

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
December 17, 2021

For Information:
David Bond, 802 375 3013 dbond@bennington.edu
Franelle Gerard, fgerard@chantvi.org
Sommer Sibilly-Brown, sommer@goodfoodvi.org
Jennifer Valiulis, jvaliulis@stxenvironmental.org

Every Neighborhood Downwind of Limetree Impacted by Refinery Fallout, Survey Finds

New Interactive Website Shows Extensive Health and Environmental Impacts on St. Croix

A recent survey measured and mapped extensive community impacts from the troubled restart of the Limetree Refinery (formerly HOVENSA). Survey results have just been published on a new interactive website: www.bennington.edu/limetree.

In the past few months, federal agencies uncovered catastrophic operational failures during the rush to restart the Limetree Refinery. Yet no one has investigated the fallout of these operational failures on the people of St. Croix. Conducted in June and July, this community survey is the only field research that has been conducted on the lived impacts of the unchecked emissions that poured out of Limetree Refinery in early 2021.

“The health of the community should be the highest priority of the government. This survey confirms what we’ve long suspected: St. Croix residents west and north of the refinery have shouldered the environmental burden of industrial development without sharing in the economic benefits. We can no longer exchange our health and wellbeing for the petrochemical industry,” said Franelle Gerard, Executive Director of Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT).

“The extent of the impact demonstrated in the survey results becomes even more disturbing in the face of the possibility of another imminent attempt to start refining operations at this facility. The community is still suffering from the effects of Limetree’s operations and we are terrified that people will be forced to endure further pollution on top of the burden they are already bearing from Limetree,” said Jennifer Valiulis, Executive Director of the St. Croix Environmental Association (SEA).

The data amassed by this survey confirms the severity of toxic releases documented by EPA and OSHA investigations, and demonstrates just how deeply these failures reached into daily life of St. Croix. Significant damages to homes and health were documented in every neighborhood downwind of Limetree Refinery. 20,000 people live downwind of the refinery.

Alongside widespread damages to homes and daily struggles to breathe in poor communities of color, this survey also uncovered three untimely deaths that friends and family members ascribe to toxic emissions from the refinery.

Many of the impacts documented by this survey have not been addressed nor remediated. A year after frontline neighborhoods began complaining, contaminated cisterns, polluted farms, and emerging medical issues across the island are still waiting for desperately needed assistance.

“Months after Limetree filed for bankruptcy, many impacted families are starting to feel invisible. Our community is navigating multiple disasters, environmental and economic. I urge us at this moment to

center both. Remember there are people, families, children still waiting for assistance. I am grateful for all those who shared their stories, and all the community groups, and volunteers who made the data collection and this site possible. I implore you to take a deeper look at what happened to too many people in this community. We have an opportunity to inform our future, my prayer is we take it,” Sommer Sibilly-Brown, Executive Director of Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition.

This survey was organized as a response to community interest in documenting the damage Limetree Refinery was inflicting on St. Croix. Collecting data by going door-to-door in neighborhoods, standing outside grocery stores and community centers, and encouraging online participation, this 26 question survey gathered information from residents across St. Croix from June 17 to July 11, 2021. In three weeks, this survey generated 681 unique responses from 120 different neighborhoods across St. Croix. This survey was organized by Frandelle Gerard (CHANT), Sommer Sibilly-Brown (VI Good Food Coalition), and Jennifer Valiulis (St. Croix Environmental Association), and Professor David Bond (Bennington College).

Amplifying the communities own knowledge about what happened, this survey found extensive impacts to health and environment in the Kingshill and West End regions of St. Croix. Impacts were particularly severe in predominantly low-income Black and Brown neighborhoods that line the northwest side of the refinery. 95% of responses from frontline neighborhoods reported frequent noxious smells from the refinery and 70% of responses from downwind neighborhoods said refinery emissions caused respiratory distress.

“The fact that such gross negligence was allowed to continue unabated for so long – and the fact that nearly a year after this disaster started so many Black and Brown families are still waiting for basic assistance – are proof of American colonialism in the present tense. This is what the withholding of full citizenship looks like for communities of color. This is environmental racism,” said David Bond, Associate Director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA) at Bennington College.

The EPA determined that a faulty flare repeatedly released oily mists into the community, coating homes, cars, and farms in crude oil. On a Caribbean island where approximately half of homes collect their drinking water from the rain, unchecked refinery emissions are a drinking water crisis. 143 households reported cisterns contaminated with crude oil, including some houses 8 miles downwind of the refinery. These households come from 30 different neighborhoods, many of whom describe drinking water that now contains droplets of crude oil, smells of diesel, and causes chemical burns on skin and throats. Despite multiple calls to the refinery and the territorial government, many of these homes have not had their cisterns cleaned nor have they been provided with an alternative source of drinking water.

The EPA also determined that refinery emissions of sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide gases routinely exceeded health guidance levels and during the worst episodes spiked well beyond levels considered lethal. Exposure to these sulfurous gases can cause severe respiratory distress, lasting neurological impairment, and death. In this community survey, residents downwind of Limetree described daily noxious emissions that often provoked sudden nausea and vomiting, debilitating headaches, or the terror of being unable to breath.

This survey documented 67 residents that sought medical attention during emissions episodes at Limetree Refinery. Many residents complained of lasting injuries that continue to afflict them.

Over 100 households across the West End also reported emissions and petrochemical rains that damaged their farms and gardens. After acute emissions episodes, some reported their vegetables and fruit trees shriveled up, impacts that are consistent with deadly levels of sulfur dioxide gas.

The survey also found that 90% of residents polled believe EPA should place a full-time employee at Limetree and 80% of residents polled do not trust Limetree Refinery to tell the truth about problems at the plant.

To make survey results more accessible, Bennington College students helped design an interactive website that allows residents, journalists, and policy-makers to better understand the scale and severity of this ongoing environmental injustice.

“This website provides a detailed archive of how unchecked emissions from Limetree inflicted havoc and harm all across St. Croix in early 2021. We hope this website will be a resource for residents, community leaders, journalists, and policy-makers as the community decides where St. Croix goes from here. We also hope this website will stand as an uncomfortable reminder of the insidious damages that unregulated oil refining can inflict on an environmental justice community.” said David Bond.

BACKGROUND

The Limetree Refinery (previously HOVENSA) used to be the largest oil refinery in the world. It is also home to one of the largest oil spills in the United States, one of the largest settlements with the EPA (still largely unfulfilled), and widespread public distrust after decades of irresponsible operations.

After being closed for nearly a decade, the massive Limetree Refinery on St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands was rushed back into operation in early 2021. Cascading accidents at the Limetree Refinery disrupted life all across Kingshill and the West End of St. Croix. Every single neighborhood to the North and West of the refinery reported significant environmental and health impacts from the droplets of crude oil that routinely rained down on homes and farms, from the thick clouds of petrochemicals that crept into classrooms and bedrooms, and from asphyxiating emissions that strangled residents on a near daily basis.

After five months of recurring operational problems and unchecked emissions, the EPA issued an emergency order to shut-down the refinery for “presenting an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health” in May 2021.

For many residents, the EPA’s emergency order to close the refinery came four months too late. Among the citizens we’ve spoken with there is a widespread sentiment: these Black and Brown communities feel under assault by Limetree’s environmental malfeasance and abandoned by government agencies tasked with protecting their health.

As the Department of Justice opened an investigation into noncompliance at the refinery, Limetree filed for bankruptcy in July. The subsequent bankruptcy proceedings have placed environmental remediation and medical assistance on pause while financial debts and corporate restructuring are worked out.

“The crowning superlatives of this refinery – largest in the world, exceedingly profitable, and perhaps the essential conduit of cheap gasoline to the Atlantic Seaboard – have long rested on the apparent insignificance of Black Caribbean Americans. This mammoth refinery has always been close enough to the mainland to secure a steady supply of cheap petroleum but just far enough away to avoid any real oversight. Recent events only confirm this founding inequity,” said David Bond, who has previously written on the history of the refinery.

For more information on the survey, please contact: David Bond (dbond@bennington.edu).