

NEWS RELEASE

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Survey Finds Significant Injuries and Damages Associated With Limetree Refinery

Community Calls On EPA Administrator Regan to Open Criminal and Civil Investigation

A recent Community Impact Survey found extensive environmental and health impacts from the troubled restart of the Limetree Bay Refinery (formerly HOVENSA). Many of these impacts have not been previously reported.

Impacts were severe in predominantly low-income Black and Brown neighborhoods downwind of the refinery. Despite multiple calls to the refinery and government agencies requesting assistance, many households in these neighborhoods are still waiting for help months after their cisterns were contaminated, their gardens fouled, and their health impaired.

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.

“When we started organizing this survey, I was aware that a few people had been impacted. I am sad to say, these impacts were much worse and more widespread than I originally thought. The impacts people described to us during this survey border on nightmarish. And for many, these harrowing assaults on their health become an almost daily event during the restart of the Limetree refinery,” said Sommer Sibilly-Brown, executive director of Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition.

“This survey has begun to amass evidence of a major environmental crime, and with these alarming findings we are calling on EPA Administrator Michael Regan to open a comprehensive criminal and civil investigation into the Limetree Oil Refinery and its assault on the wellbeing of residents of St. Croix,” said David Bond, Professor at Bennington College and an organizer of this survey.

In response to community concerns, this 26 question survey gathered information from residents across St. Croix from June 17 to July 11. In three weeks, this survey generated 681 responses from 120 different neighborhoods on St. Croix. This survey was organized by Professor David Bond (Bennington College), Franelle Gerard (CHANT), Sommer Sibilly-Brown (VI Good Food Coalition), and Jennifer Valiulis (SEA). Results from the survey can be found: www.bennington.edu/Limetree.

This survey polled residents of St. Croix about environmental and health impacts resulting from the unchecked emissions of the Limetree refinery. For environmental impacts, this survey asked residents about the frequency of smells, flares, and explosions from the refinery alongside how often they found oil in their cisterns and gardens. For health impacts, this survey asked residents about how often they experienced trouble breathing, eye irritation, skin rashes, headaches, nausea, and vomiting that they associate with refinery emissions. The survey also asked residents to describe their own experience with refinery emissions, and invited policy recommendations.

The data amassed by this survey offers a troubling window into the environmental disaster many on St. Croix have been living since January.

Community Impact Survey: Summary of Findings

TABLE: How Often Did You Smell Noxious Emissions from Limetree Refinery? (Jan-May 2021)

Frequency:	Reported:	Location:
<i>Once a day</i>	170	75% from Frederiksted and Kingshill township
<i>Once a week</i>	117	63% from Frederiksted and Kingshill township
<i>Once a month</i>	128	44% from Frederiksted and Kingshill township
<i>Never</i>	79	78% from Christiansted township

MAP: Environmental Impacts

Reports of noxious smells, witnessed explosions/uncontrolled flaring, and cisterns & gardens fouled by emissions by neighborhood (Jan - May 2021)

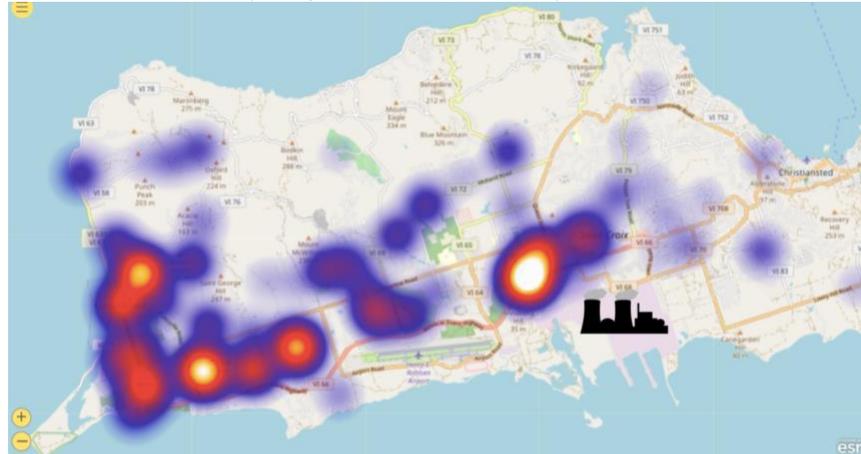
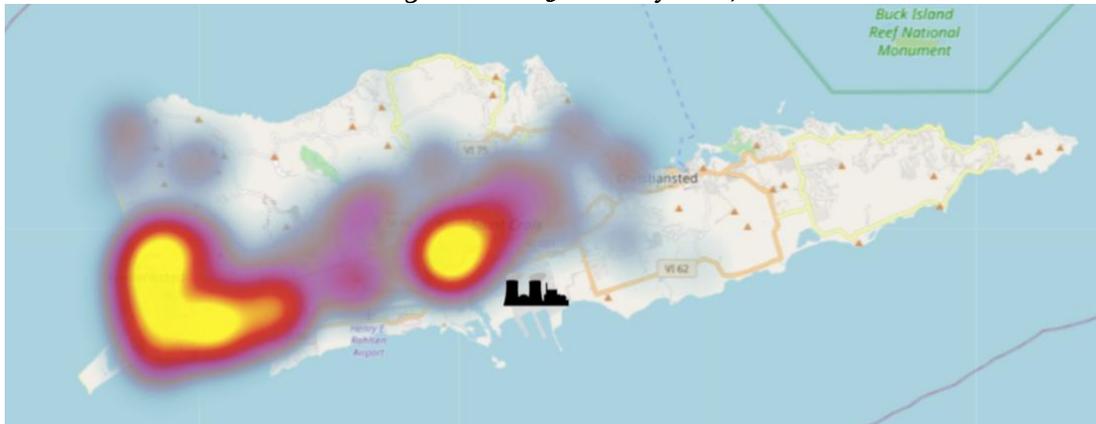


TABLE: Health Impacts from Limetree Refinery Emissions (January - May 2021)

	<i>At least once</i>	<i>At least three times</i>	<i>More than five times</i>
Trouble Breathing	301	220	133
Headache	296	220	151
Eye Irritation	281	212	140
Nausea	238	164	107

MAP: Health Impacts

Reports of trouble breathing, headaches, eye irritation, and nausea attributed to refinery emissions by neighborhood (Jan - May 2021)



“While many may want to politicize this issue, this work is about people. So many of us were negatively affected: women, children, and families and, of course, the farmers, fishers, and ranchers. These people matter and it is my hope that this data is used to elevate their stories and also address their immediate needs,” said Sommer Sibilly-Brown, executive director of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition.

“The grassroots effort to gather this important information has shown the strength of collaboration in the search for truth and justice. It is clear that there were extensive impacts to the health and environment and that many are still suffering and in need of assistance. All local and federal resources must be immediately activated to address the urgent needs of impacted families,” said Frandelle Gerard, executive director of Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT).

This survey gathered reports of serious health and environmental impacts in just about every neighborhood to the north and west of the refinery. Which is to say, downwind. Approximately 20,000 people live or work downwind of the refinery.

In West End neighborhoods, hundreds of residents described noxious odors that left them gasping for breath or stricken with debilitating headaches on a daily basis in April and May. In Kingshill neighborhoods, hundreds of residents described low-lying chemical clouds that invaded their homes or incomplete flaring that splattered petrochemicals on their cars, cisterns, and gardens repeatedly in February, April, and May.

Over 100 households across the West End reported emissions that injured their 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. Many residents downwind of Limetree described nightly emissions so bad they woke everyone in the household, sometimes with sudden nausea and vomiting and sometimes with the terror of being unable to breath.

Many of these impacts have not been officially acknowledged, investigated, or remediated.

“Some of the most disheartening conversations were with people who had lost faith that anyone was listening to them or that anyone was going to help. They were still suffering frightening health effects, or living with contaminated cisterns, yet the government seemed to care more about keeping the refinery open than the health, safety, and even the lives of the community members that were affected by the refinery’s operations” said Jennifer Valiulis, executive director of the St. Croix Environmental Association (SEA).

“The people of St. Croix are owed a great debt accruing from the historical operations of petrochemical plants on our island. The environmental injustices suffered by our community must be addressed and repaired. Limetree must live up to its commitment to St. Croix by acknowledging and mending the widespread environmental damage and health impacts caused by incidents at the refinery. And the Biden Administration should showcase its commitment to environmental justice by working to repair the deep wounds on St. Croix,” said Frandelle Gerard, Executive Director of Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism (CHANT).

While the data is alarming, the stories shared with us describe horrors that numbers struggle to capture. Healthy men working in construction, collapsing at work sites when clouds of emissions from the refinery overtook them, now months later still unable to walk let alone work. Emissions so thick that they appeared as a fog invading living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. The terror of the night children and parents all fell out of bed, gasping for breath. Individuals, in voices still raspy from the pain, trying to describe the night the air burned their throats and lungs. Some families abandoned their homes, and slept in crowded cars for weeks so they could get upwind of the refinery and breath again.

For those with underlying respiratory issues like asthma or lung cancer, it was even worse. Some have shared stories of desperately struggling to catch a breath and unable to call out for help as their throats burned with sulphurous emissions, terrified they would not make it through the night.

Workers recounted a cloud that looked like gasoline vapors shimmering in the tropical air, a thing of curious beauty until the asphyxiation took hold. Workers described crawling off job sites on their hands and knees, desperate for fresh air. Others talked about chemical emissions that tasted almost sweet, until you couldn't taste or smell anything at all. One told us, "It felt like my nervous system was being eaten from the inside out." To this day, he struggles to stand up without losing his balance.

We've heard stories of the ER packed with people during the worst emission episodes at the refinery, of nurses describing the general affliction as "refinery" even as territorial agencies refused to acknowledge a single victim let alone a significant medical crisis.

We also collected stories of at least three tragic deaths that surviving family and friends ascribe to unchecked emissions from Limetree.

Many of these reported impacts are clustered around known emission episodes in February, April, and May at the Limetree Refinery.

"Limetree willfully defied environmental law, its operating permits, and industry standard safeguards for protecting workers and the public. The resulting toxic emissions were not only unnecessary, stupid, and illegal, they also inflicted lasting harm on poor communities of color downwind of the refinery. A toxic assault on Black and Brown people on St. Croix was committed in the broad daylight of absent oversight, and only a substantial and well-funded commitment to real justice can hold this corporate malfeasance to account, insist that repairing St. Croix take precedence over absentee investors, and ensure that a necessary turn away from polluting industries comes with broad economic gains for working people in St. Croix," said David Bond.

For much of the past 60 years, the Limetree (HOVENSA) Refinery was the largest oil refinery in the world. The refinery has a long history of environmental harms on St. Croix. After closing abruptly in 2012 following extensive contamination of St. Croix's sole freshwater aquifer, the refinery was rushed back online, bolstered by favorable Trump Administration treatment. (As has been previously reported, under Trump, EPA Region Two was reorganized as a "customer service" agency for this mammoth refinery).

As the refinery sputtered back online in February, serious flaring and toxic fumes assaulted residents of St. Croix. Limetree refinery refused to operate mandated fenceline monitoring equipment and kept relying on a malfunctioning flare unit to process dangerous emissions. The horrifying situation that followed was sadly predictable: petrochemicals rained down on surrounding communities and asphyxiating emissions strangled entire neighborhoods on St. Croix. In many low-income Black and Brown communities, these attacks on their health became a daily occurrence between February and May.

Residents cried out for help to everyone they could think of. For months, desperate calls to the refinery, to territorial agencies, and the EPA went unanswered. The lack of response to the dire situation at the Limetree refinery highlights the lack of oversight and enforcement that should have been in place before the restart to protect public health, the environment, and to ensure safe operations at the plant.

Although serious problems were apparent in February, it took EPA until mid-May to send staff and equipment to St. Croix to investigate reports of unchecked emissions, dysfunctional flaring, and shockingly routine chemical releases. As they were inspecting the fenceline at Limetree on May 6th, EPA's own staff became ill from emissions. One week later, EPA issued an emergency order to close the facility due to its "imminent and substantial endangerment of public health."

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

Individuals across St. Croix now live with lasting respiratory issues, neurological impairments, and other serious medical ailments they attribute to emissions from Limetree. Many of these injured individuals have been ignored by agencies tasked with protecting public health, and are now paying for the significant medical care they now require out of pocket. Victims of toxic pollution should never have to pay for their own medical treatment.

In response to the deficit of credibility from the refinery and territory, residents also made it clear they would prefer EPA step into a leadership role in the investigation and remediation of the contamination released by Limetree on St. Croix. (They also made it clear: EPA should help equip a new generation of environmental leaders from St. Croix). 80% of survey responses noted they no longer trust Limetree and over 90% believe EPA should have a fulltime staff member at the Limetree refinery to monitor compliance with environmental law.

We are calling for President Biden, EPA Administrator Michael Regan, VI Governor Albert Bryan, VI Congressional Delegate Stacy Plaskett, and other leaders to recognize the tremendous harm this refinery has inflicted on St. Croix, to pursue justice for the people of St. Croix, and to bring resources adequate to the immense task of cleaning up St. Croix and building a more sustainable economy.

President Biden should showcase his commitment to environmental justice by directing resources to St. Croix. What better place to acknowledge the disproportionate toxic burden faced by communities of color and the necessity of forging a more sustainable economy than on a Caribbean island besieged by a negligent oil refinery and two back-to-back Category 5 hurricanes? Building a new St. Croix should be at the top of the White House's list of projects to address the climate crisis and enact environmental justice.

In response to these survey results, we are calling on the EPA, first and foremost, to provide immediate and substantial assistance to environmental justice neighborhoods negatively impacted by Limetree emissions. These neighborhoods, through no fault of their own, are still living with contaminated cisterns, destroyed gardens, and impaired health. Unable to purchase costly bottled water, many households are still bathing and cooking with water that smells of petrochemicals. These communities cannot wait for more talk from afar. They need help here and now.

In addition, we are calling on EPA Administrator Regan to launch a comprehensive criminal and civil investigation into Limetree. This must include efforts to clearly explain to residents of St. Croix what went wrong at Limetree, how those operational failures were allowed to continue from January to May, what chemicals were likely released during that period, and what the likely health and environmental impacts of those toxic releases might be. There is a tremendous amount of false information about Limetree circulating on St. Croix. It is vital that the public know the truth about what happened.

In response to these survey results, we are calling on Governor Bryan, Delegate Plaskett, and other elected VI leaders to formally request the Limetree/HOVENSA site be added to the federal Superfund list. Designating the refinery a Superfund site is not only an honest acknowledgement of how refinery has damaged the groundwater, soil, air, and mangrove estuaries of St. Croix, it also brings immediate authority and resources to begin cleaning up that mess. Superfund is an opportunity to remake the economic foundation of St. Croix around good paying jobs for Crucians that don't endanger public health.

SEA, CHANT, and the VI Good Food Coalition will be hosting a virtual Community Listening Session on Thursday, July 15, at 6:00. This will be an opportunity for community members to discuss the survey results and share their own experiences. To register follow this link (<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/community-listening-session-limetree-impacts-on-health-and-environment-tickets-162842433101>), or please visit the Facebook page of the St. Croix Environmental Association or email Jennifer Valiulis (jvaliulis@stxenvironmental.org).