Environmental Injustice in Louisiana

By Deacon Chris Kellerman, SJ

When activists speak of environmental racism, they are describing a phenomenon based on the facts of history: that non-white Americans are more likely to live in polluted neighborhoods due to generational poverty, housing discrimination, and the U.S. government’s failure to live up to its treaty obligations with Native Americans. This is tougher to fight back when you’re not in the power, and point is, Louisianaans of color often feel the brunt of this injustice.

As Dr. John Balmes of the University of California, San Francisco General Hospital recently said, “You know, you have power plants or refineries or rail yards in rich, White neighborhoods. But you don’t put power plants or refineries or rail yards in rich, White neighborhoods.”

Examples of this reality are numerous. USA Today recently profiled the havoc wreaked by the Denka Performance Elastomer in Reserve, LA, in St. John the Baptist Parish. And the state-recognized Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe, due to rising sea levels caused by climate change and by the oil industry’s excessive casing and drilling, has had its lands ceaselessly encroached upon. Pollution and its impacts on communities of color has also played a significant role in the COVID-19 pandemic. It was Black and Brown Americans who were dying at higher rates than white Americans. The media devoted more attention to a sad fact that communities of color already knew: the health disparities between white and non-white Americans caused in large part by the levels of oppression where people live.

Thankfully, Gov. John Bel Edwards recently brought together a task force to study the effects of climate change on Louisiana and how the state can plan for a healthier, more equitable, and sustainable future. But if this task force is going to be more than window dressing, the state of Louisiana must put an end to the Sunshine Project.

The “solar-rich” Formosa Plastics “Sunshine Project” is a $3.4 billion, 4-billion-ton carbon dioxide complex that could stretch over 2,400 acres in District 5 of St. James Parish. It will potentially be located within walking distance of a school and within walking distance of a high school. It will house over 1,000 workers and it will be located within walking distance of a school with nearly 100% Black enrollment in a district which is 85% Black. It is even supposed to be built walking distance of a school which has nearly 100% Black enrollment in a district which is 85% Black.

You can help. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently announced a public comment period to help people get the message to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that we do not want more big polluters poisoning our communities. As our number of enrolled students continues to rise, we need to make sure that each and every one has access to an exceptional educational experience. We can’t do it without your help.

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