



Damage from Hurricane Ida is seen in Norco, Louisiana, as smoke billows from an oil refinery in the distance.

Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

What a hurricane means when you live in Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley'

By [Rachel Ramirez](#) and [Nicquel Terry Ellis](#), CNN Photographs by Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

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CNN —

Milton Cayette Jr. was stuck in his home in St. James Parish after uprooted trees from [Hurricane Ida](#) blocked his driveway and damaged his front door. Cayette, who uses a wheelchair, called parish officials for help. They never came.

Parish officials, however, told CNN that they did not receive calls that match Cayette's situation, adding that the government is "by law, not allowed to enter or conduct work on private property unless it is an emergency life saving measure." It wasn't until two days later when a group of volunteers from New Orleans came to saw and remove the trees that he was able to go outside.

"I've seen it all," Cayette, a retired industry worker, told CNN. "After Hurricane Betsy in 1965, the chemical plants started building and operating. A lot of them. It all changed."

About 50 miles away in St. John the Baptist Parish, Robert Taylor Jr., executive director of Concerned Citizens of St. John, said many residents were trapped in their attics after the storm while others witnessed their roofs being ripped off by Ida.

The lack of [emergency response](#) after the hurricane, Taylor said, is just another example of the neglect the community has long suffered. Residents say the government failed to prepare the community for the storm by not issuing an evacuation order earlier or assisting poor and vulnerable residents who could not manage to flee their homes, like Cayette.

“The government is obviously failing us and not protecting us,” said Taylor, who evacuated from St. John before Hurricane Ida hit. “And this just pushed it over the top.”



Milton Cayette Jr. was stuck in his home for two days before fallen trees could be cleared.
Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

The predominantly Black community of St. John and the nearly majority Black population of St. James sit at the heart of Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley,” the 85-mile stretch between New Orleans and Baton Rouge that’s home to more than 150 chemical plants and oil refineries. According to the Environmental Protection Agency’s 2019 [environmental justice data](#), [eight of the nation’s top 14 block groups](#) — census areas that typically contain 600 to 3,000 people — with the country’s estimated highest cancer risks are in St. John.

Until recently, Cayette, who has lived in the region for 70 years and previously worked at a nearby petrochemical plant, never connected the growth of the chemical industry to the region’s suddenly high cancer rates. But then his wife died of breast cancer a few years ago — and he has been diagnosed with prostate cancer on top of his diabetes. Now, he lives alone with the sight of industrial facilities looming outside his window.

“I was mad and disappointed at the government,” Cayette said about the lack of response after Ida. “What concerned me even more is that I’m disabled, but they couldn’t come to help.”

For decades, scientists have claimed the planet has been rapidly warming because of greenhouse gas emissions, particularly from the burning of fossil fuels. Days after Ida ravaged the homes of [vulnerable residents in Louisiana](#) and Mississippi, the EPA [released an analysis](#) concluding that racial and ethnic minority communities disproportionately suffer the most severe consequences of climate change, indicating they are the least able to prepare for, and recover from, extreme climate events such as pollution, flooding and heat waves.



People work to repair a roof in Norco, Louisiana.
Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

If the planet reaches the critical warming threshold of 2 degrees Celsius – which most [countries are careening toward](#) unless they drastically cut emitting greenhouse gases from fossil fuels – the report warns that Black people are projected to face the worst impacts of the climate crisis.

“It’s absolutely an insult that the companies that are responsible for this are also the ones that are driving climate change,” Naomi Yoder, staff scientist at the Healthy Gulf, a group working to restore natural resources in the region, told CNN. “They’re also one of the biggest drivers of land loss in Louisiana, which makes the effects of hurricanes worse.”

Compounding crises during a pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has also hit both parishes especially hard. In April 2020, St. John had the highest death rate per capita for Covid-19 in the United States, surpassing even the most densely populated urban hotspots. Around that time in St. James, the Covid-19 death rate was also [five times higher](#) than the overall national death rate.



The Holy Rosary Cemetery in Hahnville, Louisiana, sits next to a Dow chemical plant.
Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

More than a year later, with the pandemic persisting, Category 4 Hurricane Ida threw the area's high cancer and Covid-19 rates and underlying environmental health hazards, which come from the area's rampant pollution from fossil fuel industries, into harsh relief.

"It's just risk on top of risk on top of risk," Kimberly Terrell, director of community engagement at the Tulane University Environmental Law Clinic, told CNN. "There's always air pollution coming out of industrial facilities, and these communities have been burdened with that for decades."

The Rev. Lionel Murphy, pastor of Tchoupitoulas Chapel in St. John, said the storm left devastating damage to his church along with homes and other buildings in the parish, exacerbating the emotional and physical toll that air pollution and health disparities have placed on communities.

"If only we can get some attention," Murphy said, referring to public officials and emergency responders. "The people are going to leave and come back, but this storm aggravates so much else because Covid is pretty strong in St. John."



The Tchoupitoulas Chapel in St. John was damaged by Hurricane Ida.
Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

In the early months of the pandemic, Harvard's school of public health released a [preliminary study](#) showing a link between fine particulate matter, also known as PM 2.5 pollution, and increased mortality rates from Covid-19. Terrell wanted to know what that meant for Louisiana, particularly in Cancer Alley. After scraping the raw data from the Harvard study and performing her own analysis, she found that the highest death rates from Covid-19 and a majority of PM 2.5 concentrations were in Cancer Alley.

Ida added another layer of affliction by destroying houses and forcing residents to emergency shelters or relatives' homes, where they may be clustered together with potential for increased Covid-19 transmission.

"It seems like these communities are just continually burdened with risks that they didn't ask for, and don't deserve to be burdened with," Terrell said.

The current 7-day average is more than 42 new Covid-19 cases per 100,000 in St. John and more than 177 new cases per 100,000 in St. James, according to [data from Johns Hopkins University](#). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention categorizes St. John and St. James as a community with high levels of Covid-19 transmission.



Many residents across Louisiana are still enduring power outages.
Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

Taylor said he worries that residents who have been sickened by cancer as well as Covid-19 won't get the medical care they need after having to evacuate because of Ida's impacts. Some are being transported to shelters where they could potentially spread Covid-19 or even contract it, he said, echoing Terrell's concern.

Prior to Ida, [at least 16%](#) of residents in St. James Parish and St. John Parish were living below the poverty line, according to Census data.

"This is a mess," Taylor told CNN. "I don't see how poor people are expected to survive this."

Living next to an industrial facility

The proliferation of petrochemical facilities and oil refineries throughout Cancer Alley has become a familiar sight to residents along the industrial corridor. Cayette said he remembers industrial facilities emerging after Category 4 Hurricane Betsy pummeled the region in 1965. But it was only recently that residents began to realize the invisible danger the industry caused on public health and the ironic effects it has on the climate.

When a hurricane is barreling toward an industry-heavy region, petrochemical facilities and oil refineries typically begin to shutter their plants, which involves burning anywhere from hundreds to [millions of pounds](#) of hazardous materials. As part of emergency shutdown procedures, these facilities emit or burn various unprocessed chemicals and gases through a process known as flaring. Oftentimes, Yoder said, the emissions continue to escape even after the hurricane has knocked out power lines.



A damaged trailer is seen in Reserve, Louisiana, a town in St. John the Baptist Parish.
Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

“This is not something new to these communities, and it’s not necessarily even unique to a disaster situation,” Terrell said of refineries emitting toxic compounds. “It seems like consistently the people who are breathing these toxins are the last to find out about it.”

In St. Charles Parish, for instance, a Shell Norco manufacturing complex has been spewing residual gases as residents pick through the rubble of Hurricane Ida’s aftermath. After the storm, the EPA contacted Shell about the excessive smoke and reports of noxious gas coming out of its refinery. In a report, [officials noted](#) that Shell is conducting “community air monitoring” and “looking at all options to try to reduce emissions to flare.”

“While the site is safe and secure, we are experiencing elevated flaring due to a lack of steam generation,” Curtis Smith, a Shell spokesperson, told CNN. “Crews are working around the clock to complete repairs and we are making good progress on minimizing flaring until power is restored.”

In St. James Parish, residents like Sharon Lavigne have been fighting new petrochemical plants attempting to set up shop in their community. Five years ago, Lavigne was diagnosed with autoimmune hepatitis. Blood tests revealed that she had aluminum inside her body, which she later blamed on the slew of industrial facilities after attending a few environmental justice workshops.



Sharon Lavigne's home was heavily damaged by Hurricane Ida.
Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

Angered by what she learned about the industry growing in her backyard, Lavigne founded RISE St. James, a faith-based environmental justice group trying to stop any new industrial development in Cancer Alley, which Cayette is also a member of.

One of their [biggest fights](#) was against the Taiwanese plastics manufacturer Formosa, which was set to build a [\\$9.4 billion petrochemical complex](#) in St. James Parish. Not only do Formosa's own [models show](#) that their mammoth facility could emit more of the cancer-causing compound [ethylene oxide](#) than just about any other facility in the country, but their chosen location also happens to sit on two former 19th-century sugarcane plantations and a [slave burial ground](#), according to a [legal complaint](#) filed against the facility.

“My grandparents lived on this land. They bought this land and lived on it,” Lavigne told CNN. “And then when I got married, I built a house on this land.”

And while Formosa tried to push ahead with its construction during the pandemic, RISE St. James fought hard to block the company, delaying the construction further. The US Army Corps of Engineers early this year ordered Formosa to conduct a new environmental review of the petrochemical facility, thanks to legal complaints, protests and lawsuits [from environmental groups](#) like RISE St. James.

While the battle to block the multibillion-dollar facility isn't over, Hurricane Ida added to the community's problems. The storm tore Lavigne's roof and caused her ceiling to collapse, just like it did to many other houses in the parish.



A sign protesting the planned Formosa plant is seen next to a downed tree on Sharon Lavigne's property.

Edmund D. Fountain for CNN

“So many of us suffered damages from Ida,” Lavigne said, “so after RISE members rebuild, we’re going to help the rest of the community.”

Cancer Alley has faced many disasters, but none as challenging as a hurricane, air pollution and pandemic happening at once. To Cayette and Lavigne, living next to industrial facilities is a death sentence. It may take years for the community to recover, but Lavigne said they’ve been victorious before. As long as the fossil fuel industry continues to warm the planet and pollute their backyards, she said grassroots organizations will keep fighting.

“People tell me they’re glad we’re fighting the industry,” she said.

“Many tell me they can’t be out there to help me, but they’re praying for me. That was nice.”