

Do you like things made of neoprene? You probably know them as computer bags, rubber boots, or swimming, surfing, and diving suits. Soft, warm, and with a smart modern look, neoprene clothing is often worn by water sports enthusiasts. Neoprene is also often used in medicine and industry. But the way it's produced can also seriously put people's health at risk.

One example is Robert Taylor, an eighty-year-old who lives with his family in Reserve, a small town in Louisiana, US. The landscape along the Mississippi is flat and fertile. The majority of residents here are Black families whose ancestors were slaves on Louisiana's sugar plantations. When slavery was abolished, the families worked hard over many generations to make a modest living from the land. They used the little money they could save to build houses and provide their descendants with a better life. But today, Robert Taylor wouldn't wish his town on anyone. The air has been poisoned by toxic pollutants emanating from the 140 plastic and chemical factories built locally in recent decades. For their owners, there are good reasons for being here: The land is cheap, fracking gas is cheap, and the proximity to the Gulf of Mexico makes it easy to ship their products. Besides, no one expects the disadvantaged population to fight back.

Reserve is located in St. John the Baptist Parish, an area along the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans some call »Cancer Alley.« Almost everyone in the small town has family members who died of cancer. Many suffer from malignant tumors or other

illnesses such as immune system disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, headaches, nausea, dizziness, or palpitations. Residents have long suspected that they have a higher incidence of sickness, but they could never prove where it came from.

It was not until 2015 that the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) confirmed that the cancer risk here was the highest in all of America. The chance of getting cancer in Reserve is 50 times above the US average. Forty-five different toxic industrial fumes have been identified in the air along Cancer Alley. This cloud of substances makes it impossible to attribute specific illnesses to specific chemicals, and thus to prove which plastic or chemical factory is responsible for them. No company can therefore be held accountable.

Only chloroprene can be clearly attributed to a specific factory, because it is only released during the production of neoprene. The Japanese company Denka, which was part of the plastic company DuPont until 2015, is the only one to produce neoprene in the US. The factory is situated just a stone's throw from Reserve. When residents in the town found out that for 50 years they had been breathing in a toxic gas classified as »probably carcinogenic« by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, they were shocked and angry. At the same time, there was also a sense of relief: Now armed with real facts and figures, they were sure that something would change. The factory would close or severely limit its chloroprene emissions.

But they were wrong. No one is willing to take action against the neoprene factory, as the company provides jobs and is a source of tax dollars. In the face of public pressure, Denka did volunteer to reduce its chloroprene emissions in 2017, but they are still often 100 times higher than the maximum values recommended by the EPA. »All the company's interested in is money,« says Robert Taylor. His mother, two siblings, his favorite cousin, and several of his neighbors have all died of cancer. His wife has breast cancer and multiple sclerosis and has had to move away. Robert Taylor's daughter has a disease of the digestive system likely caused by chloroprene and cannot work. In his desperation, he co-founded the resistance group Concerned Citizens of St. John. At weekly meetings in the local church, he talks to residents and encourages them to fight back. Together, they pore over documents, laws, and research papers, and invite representatives from the press, government, and industry to come to their town. They have formed links with national and international environmental organizations, who support them and add weight to their protest.

In the early days, their struggle seemed hopeless, as the industry would stop at nothing to protect its interests. Plastic giants such as Denka can afford the best lawyers and pay for scientific studies to dispute the figures from the EPA and prove that their emissions are harmless. Reserve's residents are also disappointed by the EPA, which prefers to support protests in wealthier areas mostly populated by white people. People are also fighting air pollution caused by plastic companies in other places, but in contrast to Reserve they usually have more money and the necessary connections to make sure their voices are heard. The problem of chloroprene exists only in the direct vicinity of the neoprene factory, says the EPA, which would rather focus on toxic gas emissions that affect more people.

Robert Taylor and his fellow protesters are not giving up. They want the chemical companies to know that they are being watched. The people here want to stay in the place where their families have always lived. It's a long and arduous task, but they have now achieved something: The courts have upheld their lawsuit against Denka. It's a huge success.