

Statement of Dr. Beverly Wright, Executive Director

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to the

Department of the Interior Public Forum on the Federal Oil & Gas Program

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I'd like to begin with congratulations to Secretary Debra Haaland on her appointment to lead the Department of the Interior. I want to express my gratitude to the Biden-Harris Administration for making the achievement of environmental justice and equitable climate solutions a national priority. I see all of this as a long time coming. I appreciate being invited to this panel to address the Federal Oil and Gas Program.

My name is Beverly Wright, and I am the executive director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. I co-founded the Center nearly 30 years ago in New Orleans, Louisiana. We partner with communities who are harmed by environmental racism and face serious climate threats in the Gulf Coast Region. We provide interdisciplinary education and research as well as strategic policy and legal assistance that support communities to effectively engage in governmental decisions affecting their health and wellness. We conduct worker training programs in six states that prepare unemployed and underemployed people to attain state certifications for environmental careers involving remediation, construction, disaster response, and restoration. I co-direct the HBCU Climate Change Consortium with Dr. Robert Bullard at Texas Southern University, which prepares students at 32 HBCUs to contribute to climate solutions through scientific research that they conduct and present at the Annual HBCU Climate Change Conference. More than 300 HBCU students attend this conference with leaders of community-based organizations, academicians, researchers, advocates, and practitioners in the field.

I urge Secretary Haaland to undertake an environmental justice review of the Federal Oil and Gas Program in order to address the racial discrimination that is central to oil and gas operations.

For more than 50 years, the oil and gas industry has dominated the Gulf Coast Region to the detriment of Black communities engulfed in the massive amounts of toxic pollution from oil refining and the manufacturing of plastics from oil and gas feedstocks. In the 2019 Toxic Release Inventory, the petroleum sectors report the release of 11 million pounds of pollution in 25 Louisiana parishes. Much of this pollution is released from multiple facilities located in close proximity to Black residents. These facilities release chemicals in the air that are scientifically known to cause cancer as well as damage heart and lung functions which make it difficult to breathe and cause premature death.

Unfortunately, the health threat of toxic pollution is made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. A study by Harvard University public health researchers found that long-term exposure to PM 2.5, which are fine airborne particles released by sources that include the oil and gas industry, increases the risk of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths. Black people are more exposed to PM 2.5 pollution at a rate that is one and a half times higher than the population at large.

Air pollution is not the only concern. We have reported on the massive amount of oil spill waste from the BP oil drilling disaster being disposed in landfills next to Black communities. For example, three of the five landfills in Louisiana that received this waste are located in Black neighborhoods. Less known oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico add to this racial inequity.

We are deeply concerned about the greenhouse gas emissions from the oil and gas industry that contribute to the climate crisis. With each climate-induced disaster, Black and other communities of color suffer the most from stronger storms, increased flood events, sea level rise, and dangerous heat waves. Climate studies, including the National Climate Assessment, recognize that it is our communities who are disproportionately exposed to extreme weather and less likely than white communities to recover from them.

Oil and gas drilling off the coast of Louisiana has demonstrably changed the US border as a result of the sprawling network of pipelines that transport the oil and gas inland. The massive land loss of Louisiana's coast removes natural defenses to storms, elevates sea level rise, and leaves entire communities, in particular Black and Indigenous communities, vulnerable to the destructive impacts of climate-induced disasters.

Communities in the Gulf Coast Region are working for equitable energy solutions. We work in collaboration with diverse organizations known as Energy Future New Orleans. Together, we have moved our City Council to open a utility regulatory proceeding to establish a renewable portfolio standard. If passed, New Orleans would be the first renewable energy city in the South. We also coordinate the Climate Action Equity Project in which community-based organizations across New Orleans have identified and are now pursuing actions that achieve racial equity while reducing our city's greenhouse gas emissions. Our work needs the support of federal leadership that prioritizes racial equity in energy solutions.

The demand heard from Black communities from Louisiana's Cancer Alley to environmental agency public hearings taking place across America is for a moratorium on pollution permits. A permit moratorium is essential to ensuring environmental justice and mitigating climate change. This demand is answered by New Jersey lawmakers who recently passed a law to prevent pollution permits in overburdened communities, as well as by members of Congress who are working to pass the Environmental Justice for All Act, a bill that establishes a civil rights remedy for environmental racism. President Biden's Executive Order 14,008 is similarly aligned. The order takes the precautionary step of cancelling the March 17 oil and gas sale leases that would have auctioned more than 78 million acres of the Gulf of Mexico.

Poor health conditions in Black communities and the existential threat of the climate crisis are among the egregious secondary and cumulative impacts that spiral from oil and gas leases. I strongly recommend the Department of the Interior review the Federal Oil and Gas Program with an analysis of how it perpetuates environmental racism and the racial inequity of climate vulnerability. Our survival depends on it.