

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1304

March 22, 2024

The Honorable Michael Regan
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20460

The Honorable Debra Shore
Regional Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency Region 5
77 West Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, IL 60604

Dear Administrator Regan and Regional Administrator Shore,

We write to express our support for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s ongoing investigation into pollution in the Collateral Channel that connects West 31st Street to the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. For years, Little Village neighborhood residents have complained about headaches and nausea caused by the Channel's foul smell.

The cumulative impacts of pollution in Little Village, which are inextricably tied to environmental racism, have caused real harm to our constituents. In addition, calls to remediate the Collateral Channel have been ignored. Since 2019, we have sent multiple letters to the EPA Administrator and Region 5 Administrator expressing concern over various environmental hazards in the district. These letters asked the EPA to address concerns over potential health impacts from the MAT Asphalt Plant, air pollution from the botched Crawford Coal Plant demolition, contaminated soil from the Peoples Gas Crawford superfund site, and the need to address cumulative impacts of pollution in the Southwest Side. The polluted water of the Collateral Channel is yet another site on a long list of environmental injustices in our district.

The Collateral Channel was constructed in the late 19th century. Over the years, large quantities of contaminants from industrial discharges have been released into the Channel.¹ One study states that past releases of contaminants into the air, water, and soil near the Channel were largely unregulated, leading to substantial pollution of the Channel.¹ Multiple studies show that high levels of heavy metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) contaminate the Channel.¹ PAHs are a class of chemicals that occur naturally in coal, crude oil, and gasoline and there is evidence that they have been absorbed and stored in the soil of the Channel.¹ These pollutants alter soil properties, decrease microbial biodiversity, and degrade the health of the ecosystem.²

Not only does the pollution in the Collateral Channel pose an environmental hazard, but it is also a public health concern. The Department of Health and Human Services has determined some PAHs to be carcinogens.³ The PAHs in the Collateral Channel are estimated to be as high as 1500 mg/L. As far back as 2008, researchers wrote that sediment in the Channel was highly contaminated "at a level that is of significant concern for ecological health and human health."⁴

¹ Science Direct, *Characterization, performance modeling, and design of an active capping remediation project in a heavily polluted urban channel*, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0048969710003566>

² National Library of Medicine, *Petroleum-contaminated soil: environmental occurrence and remediation strategies*, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9133283/>

³ Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, *ToxFAQ for Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs)*, available at <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/ToxFAQs/ToxFAQsDetails.aspx?faqid=121&toxid=25>

⁴ Chicago Sun Times, *Someone's got to clean up the foul-smelling, toxic waterway in Little Village*, available at <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2024/1/11/24033272/epa-review-cleanup-toxic-waterway-little-village-collateral-channel-mwrdr-army-corps-editorial>

Little Village is an immigrant, working class neighborhood that has been burdened by pollution from industry for decades. It was recently named an “environmental justice neighborhood” by the City of Chicago’s environmental health study.⁵ From demolitions leaving the neighborhood coated in ash to air pollution from concentrated diesel truck corridors, Little Village, like many other marginalized communities, has historically been a dumping ground for Chicago’s industrial waste.⁶ The Chicago Environmental Justice Index shows that Little Village ranks in the 90th percentile for pollution burden, with especially high levels of air pollution and fine particulate matter—the single largest environmental contributor to premature death.⁷

It is unacceptable to continue outsourcing pollution to vulnerable communities, who have no choice in living near toxic waterways, breathing polluted air, or drinking contaminated water. The Collateral Channel is a prime example of the lack of environmental justice for neighborhoods in the Southwest side.

We urge the EPA to make a swift determination regarding responsibility over the Collateral Channel and its remediation. We also urge the EPA to communicate with residents and local elected officials throughout the evaluation. Included below are questions we would like to be addressed:

1. What were the results of the EPA’s preliminary evaluation of the Collateral Channel? What actions were taken by the EPA during this preliminary evaluation?
2. Has there been an official assessment by the EPA of the potential health impacts for residents living near the Collateral Channel and, if not, who is responsible for making such a determination?
3. What are the next steps in the EPA’s process for determining whether a cleanup is warranted and the entity responsible for cleaning up the Channel?

Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to your response and cooperation on this important matter.

Sincerely,



Jesús G. “Chuy” García
Member of Congress
Illinois’ 4th Congressional District

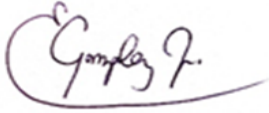


Celina Villanueva
State Senator
Illinois’ 12th State Senate District

⁵ Maxwell Evans, Block Club Chicago, *These South And West Side Neighborhoods Have Been Hardest Hit By Pollution, Study Shows*, available at <https://blockclubchicago.org/2023/09/18/these-south-and-west-side-neighborhoods-have-been-hardest-hit-by-pollution-study-shows/>

⁶ Smarth Gupta, Dillon Bergin, Maria Ines Zamudio, Brett Chase, Charmaine Runes, WBEZ Chicago, *Chicagoans who live near heavy-traffic corridors are breathing the most polluted air*, available at <https://www.wbez.org/stories/a-new-sensor-network-reveals-chicagos-air-quality-disparities/22398e94-982c-4dcc-8c13-ff0113ff95b6>

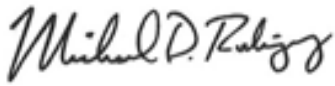
⁷ Juanpablo Ramirez-Franco, WBEZ Chicago, *Little Village residents install air sensors to monitor neighborhood pollution*, available at <https://www.wbez.org/stories/little-village-air-pollution/60a62ab3-a3e3-4455-8a07-41bf72dc44de>



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