

Interview Marylee Orr, Louisiana Environmental Action Network

Marylee Orr is Executive Director of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN), a statewide coalition of environmental, religious, civil rights and community groups working to protect Louisiana's environment.

LEAN will administer two local public health programs funded by the settlement of NELC's Clean Air Act case against Bayou Steel.

What are some of the biggest environmental challenges in Louisiana today?

Louisiana is number one in the nation for discharges of toxics into our air, land and water. That affects our health, our quality of life, our environment and our state's economy.

Here in Louisiana, for example, we have very high rates of cancer. So when an issue like Bayou Steel's illegal air pollution comes along, we really feel like it affects our everyday health.

At the outset of the case, what did you think the prospects were of getting Bayou Steel to comply with the law?

Trying to change the way a big company conducts itself, most folks felt it was pretty grim. They could protest and march, but without the legal tools to hold the polluters accountable, they were very frustrated.

How did NELC help bring about justice in this case?

It was certainly a long battle, even once it reached the legal arena, but people ultimately found justice.

NELC brought about a settlement that will not only require Bayou Steel to make improvements in its processes and have less of an environmental impact on the community, but part of the settlement will be used to improve the quality of life and to help the citizens in St. John Parish.

This case was an example of how community people and lawyers can work together to improve the quality of life.

With industries releasing tens of millions of pounds of toxic chemicals into our air in Louisiana, there are a lot of companies, like Bayou Steel, that are not being good neighbors. Fortunately, NELC was there to hold them accountable.

What are some of the projects that you will implement with the funding from the settlement?

We're very excited to be able to do things that have never been done before in those communities, such as an asthma camp for kids suffering from the ill effects of the area's poor air quality, and other envi-



ronmental education and monitoring programs.

The camp will be a week-long program, where kids will learn how to manage their care, and learn how to cope with their disease, while having fun and being around other kids with asthma.

What have you learned from this case about taking on large polluters?

The case has reinforced my belief in the legal system—that it can bring about justice for average citizens, that it can hold these huge giants accountable, and that the community can ultimately benefit from the outcome.

What advice would you give to concerned citizens in other areas of the country about taking on a polluter in their community?

I would tell them to persevere; to not give up; to be politically active; to attend meetings in their communities; but also to seek legal help from someone like NELC who will champion the case and get results. ♦

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