April 9, 2024

Unidentified Speaker: Good morning, everyone and welcome to this incredible day to announce the great leadership of our Administrator Michael Regan. I’m excited to be here celebrating the momentous steps to reduce toxic air pollution from chemical plants. I want to start by thanking everyone here, especially our great leader the EPA Administrator Michael S. Regan, (applause) Dr. Beverly Wright, Deep South Center for Environmental Justice. (Applause) Our outstanding advocates Dr. Beverly Wright heads that office as an advocate that's been in the trenches for a very long time, doing the work of the people. She's joined by a host of other incredible advocates, Sharon Lavigne, Rise St. James Parish, Robert Taylor, Concerned Citizens of St. John, Patrice Simms, Earth Justice, and Nalleli Hidalgo, Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services. Without the federal partnership of the EPA and local advocates like my friend, Dr. Beverly Wright, Sharon Lavigne, Robert Taylor, we wouldn't be here today. Make no bones about it, it's because of their advocacy, their hard work, and their commitment to staying in the trenches and fighting when no one else was listening, making sure that the issues that were related to environmental justice and fairness and equality would always be heard. With this rule, the White House is addressing health concerns for at risk communities and promoting environmental justice actions that will significantly reduce emissions and pollutants, both nationally and in my home state specifically, will reduce chloroprene from Denka Performance Facility in Louisiana, the largest source of these toxic emissions in the country. This will safeguard the health of our residents and mitigate the risk of cancer and other serious illnesses associated with long-term exposure to such chemicals. We cannot have a healthy society without a healthy environment. By slashing 6200 tons of toxic air pollution annually were taking concrete steps to mitigate the risk posed by harmful chemicals. Additionally, this rule highlights the Democrat’s commitment to protecting vulnerable populations, including but not limited to our children. By reducing emissions of EtO and chloroprene we are taking proactive measures to ensure a healthier community. But the work doesn't stop here. The EPA is not only enforcing existing regulations but also actively investigating additional sources of EtO emissions and opportunities from emissions control. Through ongoing research and enforcement efforts we will continue to prioritize the health and safety of our most vulnerable communities. By addressing these issues, we know that we make a difference, we know that coexistence is possible but only when communities are safe, only when people have the right to drink clean water, breathe clean air, and the most important commodity of any industry is its people and the communities that are in its proximity. This action today demonstrates that if you violate, EPA will get you, if you break the rules, you will be dealt with and you will reduce emissions to make our community safer. I cannot thank you enough Mr. Administrator for your tireless efforts, for the work of the Biden Harris Administration and your being on the ground in Louisiana listening to these incredible people and so many others across the country who have made a compelling case that they deserve equal protection under the law. Today we're yet another step toward making that happen, a big round of applause for you sir. It is my distinct honor to bring up someone that all of you know and someone that I've known my entire life and she has been a tireless worker in Louisiana, someone that just doesn't quit, her batteries have batteries, she doesn't miss a beat, she's tough, she's smart, she's thorough, she calls balls and strikes, she calls it as she sees it, she steps up in the face of any adversity to fight for the people and to fight for environmental justice, it is my distinct honor and privilege and pleasure to present you my dear friend, your dear friend, Dr. Beverly Wright. (Applause)

Beverly Wright: Good morning or good afternoon, I'm not sure which it is at this point, but I am really indeed happy to be here, and my battery has batteries. I really like that; my doctor keeps telling me that's not true but (laughter) we'll move on. So, my name is Dr. Beverly Wright, I am a lifelong resident of New Orleans, Louisiana. I have personally experienced the pain of being exposed to petrochemical pollution and suffered losses from the climate crisis brought on by the fossil fuel industry. In 1992 I founded the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Xavier University of Louisiana to give voice to the enormous burdens unjustly imposed on predominantly black communities in Cancer Alley. My focus was to press the EPA to deliver on environmental protection that was grossly lacking in so many communities. To this end I created education and research programs for communities to learn the science of how they were impacted by pollution, as well as understand their power to engage the EPA and other government agencies on decisions impacting their lives. There have been six federal administrations since I founded the Center. The Biden-Harris Administration is the first to make environmental justice a priority in the Justice 40 initiative and federal laws such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. I want to thank President Biden for appointing the right person to head the EPA. The first opportunity I had to work with Administrator Michael Regan was on the Louisiana segment of the Journey to Justice that took place in October 2021. Following this time, the Center produced the report. The more things change, the more they remain the same living and dying in Cancer Alley. This was an update to our groundbreaking study that mapped environmental racism in Louisiana, Cancer Alley in 1994. This update shows that since the study environmental health risks have increased for black communities but have decreased for white communities. We know these risks would rise if plans to concentrate 29 new gas and petrochemical facilities and overburdened black communities come to fruition. It is our charge to defeat these plans. Administrator Regan promised action following the Journey to Justice, he brought an analytical lens to figuring out a way to lower pollution and deliver a remedy within a legal framework that is designed to be friendly to toxic industries. This requires a deep dive and working in the weeds. How many people know what the Hazardous Organic NESHAP or HON or for that matter NESHAP which stands for the National Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants. It is under this authority to the Clean Air Act that Administrator Regan found a way to significantly release, I'm sorry, to significantly reduce the carcinogens, chloroprene and ethylene oxide, as well as volatile organic compounds and to also require fence line air monitoring as a tool for robust emissions. He's shown a way forward for changing Cancer Alley. Administrator Michael Regan embodies the phrase, “promises made, promises kept”, and today is a day for celebration, not because we have arrived but because we have made a critical breakthrough for advancing environmental justice. Thank you, Administrator Regan and the Biden Administration. (Applause) I’d like to bring to the podium at this time Sharon Lavigne, an unbelievable warrior in Louisiana. In fact, she's related to my shero who worked with us tirelessly from the very beginning and I'll let you say her name. Thank you. (Applause)

Sharon Lavigne: Good morning, my name is Sharon Lavigne, I am the Executive Director of Rise St. James, a lifelong resident of St. James Parish. I am joined here today by my lovely daughter Shamara Lavigne who is my Executive Assistant, and I can't go anywhere without her, I need her right by my side. First, I want to thank Administrator Michael Regan for doing the right things at EPA, thank you. When he put the spotlight on our community in the Journey to Justice in 2021, he vowed to take action on the environmental injustice we face every day in St. James Parish, he took a step forward. In St. James Parish there is a ten-mile radius where a dozen petrochemicals facilities operate near the homes of black residents. This is environmental racism that we at Rise St. James fight against. We work to stop industrial expansion and clean up our air. We demand reparations for people harmed by industrial pollution. We celebrate and look forward to the pollution reduction and fence line air monitoring required in the new HON rule by EPA. We want to ensure that all fence line monitoring data is shared with our community. When action levels are exceeded, we want immediate notification in our community as well as the opportunity for us to have input on the steps taken to ensure compliance and reduce air pollution. For several years now we have been locked in a battle to protect our community from plants for more toxic industries that include the proposed Formosa Plastics Plant. Formosa emits 800 tons of toxic air pollution in our community each year, that includes ethylene oxide, one of the cancer-causing pollutants that EPA required to be cut in the new HON Rule. Formosa will soon have to go back to the drawing board to apply for air permits that will have to comply with today's HON Rule, we will be there every step of the way. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. explained the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. I am thankful to Administrator Regan for his vision and leadership to bend this arc towards environmental justice. And, I wanted to mention my cousin Imelda West, she's the one that Ms. Wright talked about, she's the one that helped to stop stopped (inaudible) from being built in Convent Louisiana and she’s, my cousin. Thank you for having us. I want to introduce my friend, dear friend and partner in this fight, Mr. Robert Taylor from Concerned Citizens of St. John. Thank you. (Applause)

Robert Taylor: Thank you, good morning oh this on my right here is my guardian angel this is my daughter, and she tags along to keep the old guy in order. My name is Robert Taylor and I'm the Co-Founder and the Executive Director of the Concerned Citizens of St. John. I was inspired, driven to form this organization by a visit that EPA came to our parish, they called a town meeting in Reserve, Louisiana, which is where I'm from, where I was born in 1940, I was raised there but it was a different Reserve because at that time it was an agrarian economy, sugar cane. We had the largest sugar cane refinery in the state I think at the time. That changed obviously over the years, and I found myself and my friends and relatives embroiled in a fight that we didn't even know we were fighting. It was really the visit from EPA in 2016 where they brought to light what was really taking place in the river parishes. When we became aware of the fact that the children in our elementary school Fifth Ward was being exposed to levels of a known or likely human carcinogen we couldn't believe. The statement that they were being exposed at over 400 times what EPA has set as a safe level of exposure at that time 0.3 micrograms. We rushed to form this organization, some friends of ours (inaudible) who was then a Councilman at Large, and by the way the only politician throughout these eight years of struggle against this onslaught from the petrochemical industry. He was the only elected official that stood with the people because the petrochemical industry having the (inaudible) saw that he was kicked out of office and never yet been able to get reelected. But our fight, just for the safety, we pleaded for relief for the children. I mean that to me was representative, not that it didn't matter that my mother died from cancer, as did my brother and my sister and my nieces and nephews, the people in our community, it's unbelievable the rate of cancer, I see why they labeled it Cancer Alley. (Inaudible) know the 92% of the population in the area known as Cancer Alley which I understand to be the five parishes, St. Charles, St. John, St. James, Ascension and Iberville Parish between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. 92% of the victims there are black and it to me is just, it was overwhelming being I never was in politics, I never was a speaker upfront, I was always self-employed and never in a public eye. I could not understand how it could be tolerated that if anybody knew that children of course, what I didn't realize then, it was about 400 students on average and they were black they were being bused in from all over St. John Parish reserved is geographically as well the center of the parish and the kids are being bused into this school, which was during segregation was the high school that I attended and the school that my children attended and my grandchildren. Now and I have a couple of great grandchildren that are going to come up suffering from something I think that should never be allowed to exist in society, in civilization today of 21st century, we plead and are now still pleading for relief for those children and for the first five to six years of the of this organization's movement, we were totally ignored. We marched from Fifth Ward, 50 miles to the State Capitol trying to bring attention to the plight of our people and get the attention of the people and authority, the Governor ignored us two trips, two marches in the 50 miles, we were totally ignored and we were at the point of where we were desperate and couldn't understand what was really going on which lo and behold I got a telephone call from Washington, DC, and this man said he wanted to help us, a government official, no the head of EPA, we marched in the hot sun because we picked the wrong time of the year to do the march in the summer, and we were ignored by everyone and this man is saying he want to come to Reserve, I mean this was beyond (inaudible) this touched me in a way that I have not overcome yet and I thought at the time that this man was doing something the greatness of it who is this man who is Mr. Biden appointed this this man and he's walking down 29th Street in Reserve he's in front of that school where those children were reaching out to us, and I thought (inaudible) but here I am today with the (inaudible) the 60 years of operation, those murderous people, they have never been under mandate and I am so grateful and I want to thank the administrator in this administration and all of the people, Ms. Wright, all of the people that that aided us because we, Sharon and I and the rest of the people in that parish, we worked so hard we looking at our people dying and suffering around us and we seem lost, no one is helping us and lo and behold and I was trying to get over the fact that that Administrator shook my hand and walked down the street and went to that school and here, he got me here now, he's actually have these people mandated something that is historical that hasn't taken place and I think that's going to give us more impetus to fight and to really be able to get some things accomplished and I'm ever so grateful to you sir and that's my main reason for being here and I'm so happy that I was able to come and thank you personally for the services that you're providing for us. Thank you very much (applause) and now I would like to introduce Patrice Sims from Earth Justice, Mr. Patrice Simms. (Applause)

Patrice Sims: Wow, should I just give my time back? So, thank you for all that. I'm Patrice Sims with Earth Justice. I really have to start by thanking our frontline leaders, those who are here and those who are not here, there's no other place to start with this conversation the people of St. James, the people of St. John Parish, people in Galveston and Houston and Lake Charles and Corpus Christi and many other cities across the country who are the champions who have made this happen, they are the reason we are here, they're the reason we've managed to get this next win in the battle towards environmental justice and for keeping this fight alive and demanding that we do better, we thank you, and I thank you, and I'm honored to be able to be a part of this struggle with all of you. We’re at a pivotal moment in the journey towards environmental justice, a moment when we have to make clear through our actions, that we won't stand by while some communities suffer, while communities are poisoned, that we will refuse to leave communities behind. The promise of the Clean Air Act is that no family, no neighborhood, no community should be forced to breathe dirty, unhealthy air. The law amended 30 years ago, promised to protect communities across the country from toxic air pollution, and act's underlying principle is clear big polluters must do everything that they can do to reduce toxic air pollution they emit into the neighborhoods and communities that we live in and the communities that bear the greatest brunt of toxic exposure disproportionately black communities, Latino communities, low-income, hardworking families have long demanded that we live up to the full promise of protecting everyone, and nowhere is this more true than for chemical plants which emit some of the worst toxic industrial pollutants, including ethylene oxide and chloroprene and for the communities that live in the toxic shadows of the chemical industry, the families whose lives and well-being have been sacrificed again and again for someone else's commercial gain. Today's final rule is a crucial step it will reduce emissions, it will target the worst pollutants like ethylene oxide and chloroprene, it will significantly lower cancer risks for the hardest hit communities. This rule's impact will have critical benefits for Texas's Gulf Coast, for Louisiana's Cancer Alley, for West Virginia's Chemical Valley and importantly EPA’s adoption of fence line monitoring requirements and its analysis of multiple community exposures reflect essential progress towards a more productive and more accountable clean air regulation. There's always more to do to demand that our laws fully deliver on the promise of clean air for everybody, and EPA’s action today brings us meaningfully closer to the promise of clean air, the promise of safe and livable communities and the promise of equitable and just environmental protection. Thank you to Administrator Regan for doing this work, thank you to Assistant Administrator Goffman, thank you to the entire EPA team, thank you to the Biden Administration for getting this work done, for putting a priority on saving lives, and for taking an opportunity to step toward making clean air a reality for some of the hardest hit communities in this country. We look forward to seeing robust implementation and enforcement in the years to come to make sure that this rule truly delivers on the promises that it's making. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to offer my perspective and it's my immense pleasure to be able to introduce Nalleli Hidalgo the Education Liaison with Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Service and a fighter in Houston, Texas for environmental justice. (Applause)

Nalleli Hidalgo: Thank you and good morning, everyone. My name is Nalleli Hidalgo, and I am an educator and community organizer with Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services based in my hometown of Houston, Texas. I am honored to be a part of today's announcements to demonstrate the power of community and involvement. Standards under the Clean Air Act made it possible to seek stronger regulations for our communities. In 1994, the first Hazardous Organic Natural Emission Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants or the HON Rule was signed. Today, once signed and placed in the Federal Registry, the HON Rule will be 30 years to date. That's taken nearly a whole generation of hard work to arrive to DC to make this announcement. As we take this moment in, we remember that we are not here as individuals but here as community standing in solidarity as we witness a key moment in rule making, a key moment to the daily harm our community face, especially those at the front line and those front-line communities that live directly across from facilities. I traveled from the Gulf Coast, and I carry with me, we all carry with us, our family, our friends, our mentors and our ancestors with whom I share my justice journey with. At the front line of this work our youth, educators, and community members who together solve problems and create pathways for future generations. In the last 30 years we have witnessed challenges, hurdles, moments of doubts, but also moments of great success such as today, April 9, 2024. This day is measured by milestones and the commitments we made to our communities and also to each other. Together we have gone further to protect our communities and will continue to turn our dreams of a cleaner world into reality. As a community we have grown stronger and more determined to protect our future. Thank you to all of our elders and those who push forward. The long hours of hard work, sacrifices, and reflection lead us to come lead us to overcome new challenges among emerging generations. On this historic day please join me in welcoming EPA Administrator Michael S. Regan. (Applause)

Administrator Michael Regan: Thank you all, thank you, thank you all and thank you Nalleli for that introduction and I want to say thank you for your leadership and what you're doing to represent young people not just for Houston but for the entire nation. I made a commitment on day one that young people would always have a seat at the table and I'm really proud that we're making good on that promise. I'm also proud to have my good friend Congressman Troy Carter in the house today (applause) yes, I can sincerely call him a good friend. The first conversation we had was one of those conversations where iron was sharpening iron, you know? And after about 40 minutes of wrestling, we both realized that we wanted the same thing for the people who are suffering on the front lines. I can tell you that the people in your District could have no better champion and I can tell you all in the Environmental Justice Movement we could have no better national champion so thank you for your leadership, Congressman. You know many of the folks in this room have been fighting for years, even decades to advance community-driven solutions at the center of environmental protection and for me it's incredible and I'm in awe to be in the room full of so many giants. To Ms. Lavigne, Mr. Robert Taylor, Dr. Beverly Wright, thank you all for being here and thank you all for inspiring me and inspiring us with your vision, your leadership and your strength and you know I wish I had in my conversation with Congressman Carter learned about this battery, having a battery (laughter) I've been looking for something to unplug. Dr. Wright, Ms. Lavigne and Mr. Taylor have always kept it 100, always held our feet to the fire, and I really appreciate that from the bottom of my heart. My trip to Cancer Alley in 2021 quite frankly is one that I'll never forget. Being on the ground and seeing firsthand what Mr. Taylor just described. Multi-generational widespread havoc that pollution can cause on so many lives is truly eye opening and it was that experience that set the tone for this EPA’s approach to environmental justice. I'm also grateful to have the advocacy and continued partnership of Mr. Patrice Simms of Earth Justice. I appreciate, we appreciate, your legal brilliance and your leadership. You know it's really fun for me as the administrator to be thanked and get all the accolades, but the truth is I work for a president who has centered environmental justice in this administration. He's the first sitting president to say at two State of the Unions utter the words environmental justice so it's great to live, to work for a leader who really is answering the call to our EJ communities, to black and brown and indigenous and low-income people, he has not forgotten, and he is really pushing all of us to do what he said from day one. I'm also a recipient of the accolades that result from the hard work of our talented political staff led by Joe Goffman and that political team. But I think Joe would admit that he and I both are fortunate that we have such strong solid career staff. For this particular rule the Office of Air Quality Planning Standards led by Mr. Peter Tsirigotis, those people have never told me no. As a matter of fact, those people were just waiting to be told to go. And so, to the career staff, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart and if we could let's give a round of applause. (Applause). You know since day one, as administrator I committed to embedding EJ into the DNA of EPA. For too long our communities, black, brown, indigenous and low-income have disproportionately suffered from bad air quality, high levels of water pollution, and the worsening impacts of climate change. The simple fact is, all people, no matter the color of their skin or how much money they have in their pockets, deserve clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and a safe place to live away from environmental hazards and harm and that's why we launched Journey to Justice. It's crucial to meet face to face with folks on the front lines of injustice and we at EPA needed to use our bully pulpit to shine a light on those communities so that we could share their stories on the national stage. So, with the help of national media, social media, a few influencers, we set out on a journey to tell Ms. Lavigne’s, Mr. Taylor's, Dr. Wright’s story and that's exactly what we did. The whole world didn't hear from me, they heard directly from the folks who've been neglected, who've been silenced and who've been ignored, and because of that, for as long as I live, I'll never forget that first swing through Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. I travelled through Cancer Alley, I met with person after person, generations of family members whose lives and health have been directly impacted by pollution and negligence of their environment. As Mr. Taylor said, I visited a school in Louisiana where young children, the very same age as my son Matthew, were learning and playing right next door to a massive petrochemical facility. At that point, before I returned home, I vowed to those communities that we visited that EPA would use every tool in our toolbox to respond to the unconscionable conditions that we saw while on the ground. And folks I'm proud to say that with the backing of the EPA staff we've been taking bold action ever since. That's why today, I'm proud to announce that we are issuing a final technology standard that will eliminate more than 6,000 tons of toxic air pollution from these facilities each year. (Applause) Folks we are slashing EtO and chloroprene pollution by an astounding 80%, reducing elevated cancer risks for those living near these communities by 96%. (Applause) Folks this is a game changer anyway you look at it. This is a game changer for the health, it's a game changer for the prosperity, it's a game changer for children in these communities nationwide. Today is a new day. According to EPA's own analysis, once the rule is fully implemented, no one will have elevated cancer risk from EtO or chloroprene emissions from equipment and processes covered by this rule. And while we're protecting communities, at the same time, I'm proud to say that we're advancing President Biden's cancer moonshot, a commitment to end cancer in this country as we know it. From day one President Biden and this administration have fought to secure a cleaner and healthier environment for every single person in this country, and with today's action, as Congressman Carter said, “we are one step closer to achieving that goal”. I want to reiterate that everyone, no matter the color of your skin, the money in your pocket or the community that you live in, deserves clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and the opportunity to live a healthy life. And as long as we're in this administration and I'm in this building, we won't stop fighting until we get there. So let me close by saying thank you to the folks on this front row, to the people in this room, and to those who are listening to us, for coming together, helping us, partnering with us, and continuing to help make this planet a safer place for all of us to live. Thank you so much. (Applause)