

# Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus 2024 Convening: Rooting in Place

New Orleans, Louisiana

## About the Convening

From March 5 to 8, more than 50 Water Equity & Climate Resilience (WECR) Caucus core members and allies convened on the traditional homelands of the Houma, Choctaw, and Chitimacha peoples — now known as New Orleans, Louisiana. This year's annual gathering, anchored by [PolicyLink](#) and co-hosted by [The Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans](#), marked a significant moment for the Caucus reaffirming its commitment to Southern perspective and lived experience in shaping its collective water work nationwide. [Watch the video.](#)



Group photo of the Caucus at the Lockport Water Treatment Plant during the coastal resilience tour hosted by the United Houma Nation.

The convening objectives were to:

- Identify interventions for the root causes of water and climate injustices.
- Learn about Caucus member organizations' work and deepen connections.
- Grow momentum for water and climate justice, connecting regional priorities to national efforts, while amplifying Southern leadership and solutions in our work.

## Programming

Throughout the convening, Caucus members engaged in site tours focused on the intersection of water, climate, and justice as well as programming aimed at sharing stories, understanding each other's work, and delving into interventions to address the root causes of water and

climate inequities. In brainstorming sessions, members identified interventions at organizational, Caucus, and sector wide levels. These sessions allowed participants to strategize around the “hot roots” of water/climate disparities across the United States.

## Hot Roots

Participants analyzed the “hot roots” of underlying systemic challenges in water and climate impacts (formulated by the PolicyLink team based on several rounds of root cause analyses with the WECR Steering Committee, during the WECR National Call, and in individual WECR Workgroups). These “hot roots” include:

- 1. Our values system prioritizes profit over people and the planet.** Racial capitalism in the United States strategically extracts resources and exploits BIPOC and low-income communities in order to increase the wealth and political power of a few.
- 2. Commodification of water supersedes our human right to water and rights of nature.** A lack of recognition of water as a living entity and rights of nature protected at the federal level removes responsibility to protect water, keep it clean, and ensure water for all (no national willingness or buy-in for this).
- 3. Federal water and climate policymaking is designed to benefit white and wealthy communities.** Federal policies are created by the “few” and don’t work for “the all.” Elected officials drafting and implementing policies do not sufficiently understand, nor represent, communities of color, low income communities, and those closest to water and climate impacts. When policies are designed with a utilitarian approach (greatest good for greatest number of people), they fail to sufficiently recognize sacrifice zones/populations or promote holistic solutions for the all (e.g., IRA is hailed as a major climate policy by many advocates, but it still sacrifices the Gulf South).
- 4. Water and climate solutions from frontline communities lack sufficient funding, political power, and accountability mechanisms.** Marginalized communities are under-resourced. Their lived experience and solutions are not directly integrated into large scale efforts. Communities of color and low income communities are not directly involved in policymaking and implementation.

## Day 1: Coastal Resilience Tour

For the first day of the convening, Taproot Earth organized a field trip guided by the [United Houma Nation](#), the largest Indigenous Tribe in Louisiana, through an area that is ground zero for climate and water justice. Throughout the tour, we heard firsthand accounts of land loss, saltwater intrusion on local drinking water, oil and gas impacts, and forced migration from areas hit by extreme weather– all compounded by colonization and a lack of federal recognition for the United Houma Nation.

While sharing the stories of the community and their climate issues, it was evident from the guides that there is an immense pride in their histories and lands. Even in the face of climate adversity, they took the time to emphasize the beauty amidst the challenges— reminding us of the importance of impacted communities having ownership of their own narrative, and celebrating strength and cultural richness. Through their stories, they shared valuable insights into the root causes of water and climate disparities, offering opportunities for brainstorming interventions and fostering meaningful dialogue among Caucus members.

Thank you to the hosts for the coastal resilience tour:

- **Principal Chief Lora Ann Chaisson**, United Houma Nation
- **Cara Stonecipher**, Chief of Staff, Office of Principal Chief Chaisson
- **Helen Babin**, Grants Compliance & Management Assistance
- **Lanor Curole**, Tribal Administrator



The United Houma Nation hosted the Caucus for lunch at the Isle de Jean Charles marina, the site of a highly contentious climate relocation program, to share their vision for Tribal sovereignty and a thriving community in the face of climate destruction.

## Day 2: Hot Roots & A Call to Action in the South

The Caucus' second day began with an informative session from the [Southern Regional Workgroup](#), a coalition of Southern member organizations and allies dedicated to advancing water and climate justice in the South. Their collective statement, "A Call to Action in the South," addresses the unique climate challenges and historical inequities faced by Southern communities, while outlining priorities and strategies for transformative change.

Following this, members engaged in "Deepening Connections," a session designed to foster deeper bonds and understanding among participants. Through story circles, members shared their personal narratives and pathways into water work, enriching the collective fabric of the Caucus and reinforcing the importance of personal connection in driving collective action.

In conjunction with this, discussions on "Hot Roots" facilitated a comprehensive review of shared root causes of water and climate injustices. Drawing from analyses conducted during National Calls and Workgroups, members identified critical areas for intervention, paving the way for targeted action towards water equity and climate resilience.

### Day 3: Cancer Alley Tour

Polluting industries sit at the heart of the intersection of climate-water-energy and justice. On Friday, March 8, Caucus members saw firsthand how small, predominantly Black communities in Louisiana are directly impacted by industrial pollution and extreme weather on a tour of Cancer Alley led by community members representing [RISE St. James](#), [Concerned Citizens of St. John](#), Refined Community Empowerment, and Delta Builds. Cancer Alley is an 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that houses over 150 petrochemical and manufacturing facilities. Once a thriving area for communities of color following emancipation, large industrial complexes have placed themselves directly next to schools, playgrounds, libraries, parks, and homes.

#### Watch more:

- [Sharon Lavigne, 2021 Goldman Environmental Prize, United States](#)
- [Our Town, Our Fight – by Shamell and Sharon Lavigne](#)



Shamell Lavigne (center), RISE St. James, and community leaders pose with the Caucus following the Cancer Alley tour, where RISE St. James is fighting the expansion of the petrochemical industry.

Hosts for the Cancer Alley Tour included:

- **Dr. Kim Terrell**, an environmental scientist for the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic (pictured below)
- **Sharon Lavigne**, founder of RISE St. James
- **Shamell Lavigne** and **Shamyra Lavigne**, Sharon's daughters and community activists with RISE St. James (pictured below)
- **Kimbrelle Kyereh**, **community organizer and** founder of Refined Community Empowerment
- **Dr. Dorothy Nairne**, community organizer with Delta Rebuilds and a Board Member of Refined Community Empowerment (pictured below)
- **Larry Sorapuru**, member of the Concerned Citizens of St. John and a Board Member of Refined Community Empowerment
- **Robert & Tish Taylor**, co-founders of Concerned Citizens of St. John (pictured below)

## What's Next?

This year's WECR Caucus convening was intentionally designed to be heavy on tours to highlight the challenges that communities across Louisiana face — many of which are shared among low-income communities and communities of color across the United States.

The WECR Caucus will continue building interventions to the root causes of water and climate disparities, and use these to strategically shape the direction of the WECR Caucus Workgroups and the next phase of the WECR Caucus strategy. [The Caucus](#) invites members and allies to stay engaged through our quarterly national calls, workgroups, and listservs. The [Southern Regional Workgroup](#) invites members and allies to continue to learn from the unique struggles and successes of southern organizing, to lend technical and policy support, and to promote the work of Southern environmental justice organizations.

By amplifying our collective voice, we can continue to drive meaningful change and co-create a future where all communities can thrive in harmony with the environment.

We want to thank the many folks that put in the time and effort to make this another thoughtful and thought-provoking WECR Convening, including:

- Our local partners and tour hosts, the United Houma Nation, RISE St. James, Community Refined Empowerment, Concerned Citizens of St. John, Delta Builds, and the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic.
- Our local co-hosts, The Water Collaborative of New Orleans.
- Our planning committee: Arthur Johnson, Center for Sustainable Engagement & Development; Celina Mahabir, Community Water Center; Kendall Dix, Taproot Earth; Rebecca Malpass, The Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans; and Katy Lackey, PolicyLink.