

For Immediate Release

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Environmental Justice Groups Cheer GUILTY Verdict Against Citgo

Community Complaints of Health Hazards from Refinery Toxic Fumes Vindicated

(Corpus Christi, Texas) Years of community pollution complaints from Citgo refinery neighbors in Corpus Christi, Texas were vindicated by a federal jury today who found the plant manager and the corporation guilty of 2 counts of violating the Clean Air Act and covering it up for many years. Verdicts for the Citgo Federal Criminal trial were announced today in an unprecedented trial held in Corpus Christi, Texas Federal Courthouse.

“The evidence I saw throughout the trial that was presented by the United States showed that Citgo knew they were not only breaking Federal law, but that they were hurting the community with no regard to them,” said Suzie Canales, with Citizens for Environmental Justice. “Their acts were criminal. White collar crime is just as deadly as street crime; the only difference is that in white collar crime, people don’t usually drop dead on the spot, they die later. We must all view white collar crime, environmental crime, as being just as deadly and just as serious as the crime highlighted on the news every day.”

Documented complaints from people in the community showed that the benzene emissions, the pollution from these tanks, was reaching the community and adversely impacting them. Jean Salone testified in court that on September 2001, a terrible odor woke her up from a sound sleep. The odor was attributed by state investigators to be coming from the tanks operating illegally by Citgo.

“Today Citgo’s neighbors have been vindicated about constant complaints about foul odors and health problems from the refinery’s pollution,” stated Denny Larson, Refinery Reform Campaign (RRC). “Despite all the high priced public relations schemes employed by Citgo, they could not cover up to huge open tanks of oil spewing cancer causing benzene into the community.”

The Hillcrest Community, a predominantly low-income people of color community, borders Citgo Refinery’s East Plant. Hillcrest is a Historic African American community, dating back to the city’s race-zoning practices when people of color and low-income were forced to live by the most polluted areas. Although the race-zoning restrictions were taken off the books decades ago, the environmental racism still exists.

“This is a tremendous victory for so many people that have been unjustly treated by Citgo and other oil refineries for several decades,” said Suzie Canales with Citizens for Environmental Justice. “The tide is finally turning; the oppressed are finally seeing justice.”

On March 7, 2002, an unannounced inspection by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) found oil in tanks 116 & 117 measuring approximately 7.75 feet in tank 117 and 10.5 feet of oil in tank 116. Based on the diameter of the tanks (240 feet), inspectors estimated that there was approximately 4.5 million gallons of oil in tanks 116 & 117.

Other counts, which include The Migratory Bird Treaty Act and charges against Citgo's Environmental Manager, Phil Vrazel, who faces prison time, will be tried separately.

To view the Citizens for Environmental Justice Blog on updates of the USA vs Citgo Federal Criminal Trial, please go to: <http://usavscitgo.blogspot.com/>

Details of the crimes Citgo was charged and found guilty of include:

Count 4 – Clean Air Act: Citgo Refining and Chemicals Company did knowingly operate tank 116 as an oil/water separator without installing pollution control device (floating or fixed roofs) to prevent emission of Benzene into the environment. – GUILTY

Count 4 – Clean Air Act: Citgo Petroleum Corporation did knowingly operate tank 116 as an oil/water separator without installing pollution control device (floating or fixed roofs) to prevent emission of Benzene into the environment. – GUILTY

Count 5 – Clean Air Act: Citgo Refining and Chemicals Company did knowingly operate tank 117 as an oil/water separator without installing pollution control device (floating or fixed roofs) to prevent emission of Benzene into the environment. – GUILTY

Count 5 – Clean Air Act: Citgo Petroleum Corporation did knowingly operate tank 117 as an oil/water separator without installing pollution control device (floating or fixed roofs) to prevent emission of Benzene into the environment. – GUILTY

Citizens for Environmental Justice are a grassroots group based in Corpus Christi, Texas who works to achieve environmental justice. Their website is: www.cfejcorpuschristi.org or www.citgojustice.org. The Refinery Reform Campaign is a national campaign that seeks to clean up refineries. The RRC's website is: www.refineryreform.org

Suzie Canales is the recipient of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute award for outstanding achievements in Environmental Justice.