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Turkey Creek

THREAT: Two major developments

STATE:

Mississippi

AT RISK:

Historic preservation, public health and safety

SUMMARY

Coastal Mississippi's Turkey Creek has supported vibrant, culturally rich communities since the 1800s. However, rampant urban sprawl and toxic contamination have eliminated forests and wetlands, increased flooding and threatened homes. New proposed roadways and wetland fills could harm the Creek, undo recent restoration, and perpetuate further injustice to historic Black communities. Turkey Creek is a national posterchild for how injustice and inequity persist in development decisions. Mississippi state agencies must retract recent development permits and consider the full suite of cumulative impacts on local communities and the environment.

PHOTO: HARRIET FESTING

THE RIVER

Historically popular for fishing, swimming, boating and baptisms, Gulfport, Mississippi's 13-mile Turkey Creek is a freshwater stream and a brackish estuary that connects to Bayou Bernard just north of the Gulfport-Biloxi International Airport. In addition to supporting an important recreational and subsistence fishery for species such as bluegill, largemouth bass, gar, pickerel and crappie, the creek is an inland coastal nursery for Gulf of Mexico shellfish species, and an important stopover for migrating birds.

Turkey Creek flows through several historically important African-American "sister" communities including Turkey Creek, North Gulfport and Forest Heights. In 1866, recently emancipated former slaves purchased and settled the 320 acres or "eight forties" that came to be known as the Turkey Creek community. It remained essentially undisturbed until the mid-1980s when annexation and coastal sprawl reached the area. The Turkey Creek settlement's historic cemetery was largely destroyed in 2001, leading the Mississippi Heritage Trust to list that community as one of Mississippi's Ten Most Endangered Historical Places.

The Forest Heights community was one of the nation's first integrated home ownership developments for low-income families. Established in the 1960s, its development was led by the National Council of Negro Women, in partnership with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and supported by the Ford Foundation. The success of Forest Heights led to similar "Turn Key" programs for home ownership across the country. While it suffered damages in Hurricane Katrina, the community retains much of its original aesthetic and cultural character.

Since the late 1990s, residents, including North Gulfport's Rose Fairley Johnson, have had to fight efforts to develop wetlands surrounding their communities and the Creek. Released in 2014, the documentary 'Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek' followed the painful but inspiring journey of Derrick Evans, a Boston teacher who returned home to work with Johnson and others when the graves of his ancestors were bulldozed. Current threats to Turkey Creek are part of an unfinished fight for cultural and environmental protection, self-determination and justice.

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Continued

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

OLIVIA DOROTHY

American Rivers
(217) 390-3658
odorothy@americanrivers.org

KATHERINE EGLAND

Education, Economics, Environmental,
Climate and Health Organization
(228) 617-0891
ktegland@aol.com

VICTORIA THORNTON SHARPE

Gulfport Section National Council
of Negro Women
(228) 234-0221
vtsharpe@bellsouth.net

DERRICK EVANS

Turkey Creek Community Initiatives
(228) 864-1448
tccdirector@gmail.com

ALEXIS HIDALGO

Anthropocene Alliance
(305) 781-5147
Alexis@AnthropoceneAlliance.org

TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/
TurkeyCreek2021](https://AmericanRivers.org/TurkeyCreek2021)

PHOTO: HARRIET FESTING

THE THREAT

In recent years, the Forest Heights, North Gulfport and Turkey Creek communities have become prone to frequent flooding. The worst damage was inflicted during Hurricane Katrina, when all but five of the 200 homes in Forest Heights flooded. Both storm surges and routine flooding have been exacerbated by airport, hotel and other commercial sprawl. These developments have destroyed forests and wetlands, increasing impervious surfaces, runoff and flooding. This poorly planned airport and surrounding development have impacted the water quality and health of Turkey Creek as well as the health, safety and economic integrity of the Black communities alongside it. Now, more new developments are proposed that could make the situation worse.

One of the proposals is for an area for military shipments built by the Port of Gulfport on the site of a former fertilizer factory. The development will cover 16 acres and drain 3.15 acres of wetlands on a site where lead and arsenic

contamination exceed regulatory limits. Experts believe that the development risks mobilizing contaminants toward and into the creek — ultimately endangering the health and safety of local residents during the inevitable floods. Another proposed development includes a road connector route between commercial establishments and the airport. The road will pass just a few hundred yards from the Forest Heights community.

As the planet's climate continues to change, the frequency and intensity of storms will increase, leading to even greater flooding risks and impacts to these culturally rich but marginalized communities. Turkey Creek and the surrounding wetlands play a key role in mitigating flood risk, but increased development will only reduce the ability of the river and land to absorb frequent and intense storms and flooding.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Economic development must not come at the cost of human and ecological health, or environmental justice. Decision-makers must ensure that any economic development proposals in the Turkey Creek area are supported by the local community and protect the health of the community and environment. To this end, they must refer to the neighborhood's Community Plan and Watershed Plan.

The Mississippi Department of Transportation must halt distribution of the \$20 million in federal funding for the connector road. In addition, the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality must re-evaluate and retract their permit for the Port Authority development. An evaluation of the full suite of cumulative impacts, including health, safety and economic impacts to the creek, and the Turkey Creek and Forest Heights communities, must be conducted to reveal the true costs of this development. The wetlands must be avoided and restored to ensure that they can continue to perform their important water absorbing ecological function.

Furthermore, the Biden Administration is establishing an interagency council on environmental justice with the secretaries of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development. The council is charged with addressing issues of environmental injustice within communities of color and low-income communities. That council should examine Turkey Creek and its associated communities as a case study on the systemic racism that continues to plague development decisions surrounding these historic communities.

*In memory of Rose Johnson (July 23, 1946-April 16, 2020),
Founder, North Gulfport Land Trust.*