

9

CALCASIEU RIVER

THREAT: Pollution

STATES: Louisiana

AT RISK: Health of humans and ecosystems

SUMMARY

For centuries, the Calcasieu River has been the lifeblood of southwestern Louisiana, sustaining local communities, abundant wildlife, and thriving ecosystems. It is home to Pinky, the beloved pink dolphin, and is a place of deep connection for generations of people. But a history of chemical mismanagement and continued unregulated dumping of toxic chemicals poses an existential threat to the river's future. The Environmental Protection Agency must update outdated federal pollution control technology standards for chemical plants, plastics manufacturers, and refineries operating along the river.

JAMES HIATT

THE RIVER

The Calcasieu River in Southwest Louisiana runs approximately 200 miles, passing the towns of Oakdale, Westlake, Sulphur, Lake Charles, Hackberry, and Cameron before emptying into the Gulf.

The Calcasieu River and its interconnected bayous and marshes are a vital nursery for fish and wildlife and once sustained a thriving commercial fishing industry. It is home to the beloved Pinky, the famous pink dolphin of Southwest Louisiana, and her pod, who guide the shrimp boats in and out of the river to the Gulf. Fishermen and businesses – from marine mechanics to packing houses to restaurants – have depended on the river and its abundance for generations. Nearly one-third of all the seafood consumed in the United States comes from Louisiana, though this multi-billion dollar industry is increasingly threatened by plastics and petrochemical pollution.

The river holds deep historical significance, holding stories from French fur traders of the 1700s, train bandits of the early 1800s, and as the ancestral and current homelands of Indigenous communities since time immemorial. The Calcasieu was known to Spanish settlers as Rio Hondo, or “Deep River.” French settlers renamed the river “Calcasieu,” as a rough interpretation of the name of local Atakapa leader, “Katkōsh Yōk” (‘Crying Eagle’).

THE THREAT

The Calcasieu River has long suffered from legacy pollution that continues to harm the river and local communities. For decades, chemical plants and refineries along the river have dumped hazardous waste into its waters, leading to widespread contamination that affects both the environment and public health. These pollutants have contributed to high levels of toxins in the river and surrounding ecosystems which have led to a seafood advisory for multiple species, including catfish, speckled

CALCASIEU RIVER

Continued

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

CHANTEL DOMINGUEZ

Community Campaigns
and Engagement Director
American Rivers
775-525-6522
cdominguez@americanrivers.org

JAMES HIATT

Director
For a Better Bayou
337-515-0655
james@betterbayou.net

ALYSSA PORTARO

Executive Director and Founder
Habitat Recovery Project
973-632-1695
alyssa@habitatrecovery.org

CYNTHIA P. ROBERTSON

Executive Director and Founder
Micah Six Eight Mission
337-888-6652
cindy@micah68mission.org

JEN DUGGAN

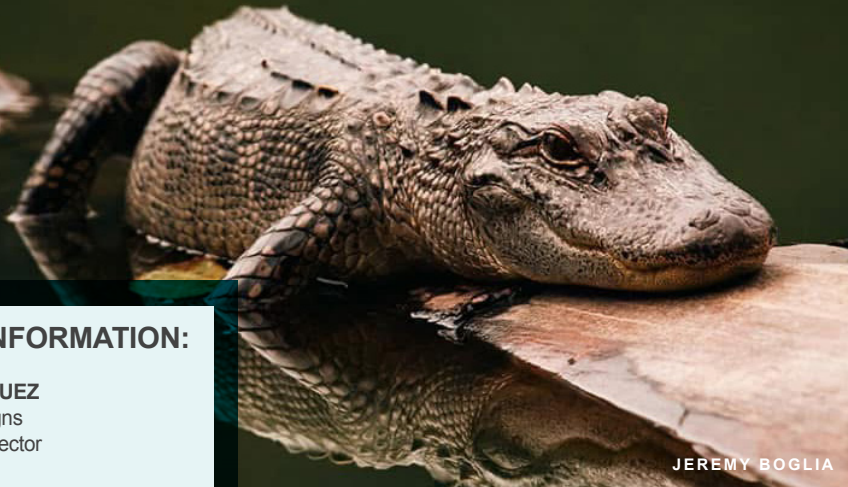
Executive Director
Environmental Integrity Project
202-263-4446
jduggan@environmentalintegrity.org

ANDREW WHITEHURST

Water Program Director
Healthy Gulf
601-954-7236
andrew@healthygulf.org

TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/
CALCASIEURIVER2025](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/CALCASIEURIVER2025)



JEREMY BOGLIA

trout, largemouth bass, and crabs. The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality advises pregnant mothers to consume no more than one meal a month of fish due to dangerous levels of mercury, Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and other carcinogenic toxins.

The river has suffered multiple catastrophic pollution events in recent decades. In 1994, over 1.7 million pounds of ethylene dichloride spilled into the west bank of the Calcasieu. In 2006, a refinery spilled millions of gallons of oil into the river, impacting an estimated 150 miles of shoreline. The results of these and other disasters have been massive fish

kills, poisoned air, forced evacuations, and countless sickened residents in historic Black communities like the 'free town' of Mossville, Louisiana.

The Clean Water Act directs the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to establish increasingly tight water pollution standards for our dirtiest industries. These standards are supposed to be regularly revised to keep up with technological advances, but two-thirds of the standards are more than 30 years old. This means that the plastics plants, chemical plants, and refineries discharging into the Calcasieu lack limits for known toxic pollutants, and that those living downstream from these industries continue to live with polluted and unsafe waters.

Many new chemical facilities are being planned along the river and its estuary. There is still time to stop the harmful, unnecessary, continuous dumping of toxic waste into the river before ecological collapse and the loss of the fishing industry occurs.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The EPA is currently working on its two-year review and update to technology standards. At present, the EPA is planning on completing their review by late 2025 or early 2026. We urge the EPA to update the water pollution standards for the following categories of major Calcasieu polluters and to add limits for toxic pollutants like benzene, dioxins, 1,4 dioxane, PAHs, and heavy metals.

- **Petroleum Refineries**, 40 Part 419 (4 refineries discharging to the Calcasieu)
- **Inorganic Chemical Manufacturing**, 40 CFR Part 415 (10 inorganic chemical plants discharging to the Calcasieu)
- **Organic Chemicals, Plastics, and Synthetic Fabrics**, 40 CFR Part 414 (14 plastic and organic chemical plants discharging to the Calcasieu)

We also urge the EPA to develop water pollution standards for "petcoke calciners," which have escaped federal regulation for more than 50 years. Two of these old and incredibly dirty plants are on the Calcasieu River, discharging unlimited amounts of lead and other metals.