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EarthBeat



Sharon Lavigne, an environmental justice activist and founder of Rise St. James, stands in front of a chemical plant near her home in St. James Civil Parish, La., a civil jurisdiction, March 13, 2022. The 85-mile corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is home to more than 150 oil refineries, plastics plants, and chemical facilities, 32 of which are in St. James Parish, and is known as "Cancer Alley." Lavigne and other Catholic advocates are concerned about provisions in the 2025 budget bill on Capitol Hill that would defund America's clean energy investments and pollution reduction programs. (OSV News/CNS/Courtesy of University of Notre Dame/Barbara Johnston)



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It's perhaps not the sort of 10th anniversary commemoration supporters of Pope Francis' landmark environmental encyclical Laudato Si' would hope for: That its auspicious June 18, 2015, publication date would 10 years later coincide with proposals by Congress to defund America's clean energy investments and pollution reduction programs, sell public lands to industry, establish legal permitting detours for potential polluters, and eliminate federal subsidies for energy-efficient technologies, among other not-so-green actions.

Yet that's what critics of President Donald Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" — which narrowly passed the House of Representatives May 22, and was released as a legislative text June 16 by the Senate Finance Committee — maintain the legislation could do, if eventually signed into law by Trump without significant changes.

While the Senate Finance Committee's OBBBA text is less drastic in some respects — particularly the timeline for phasing out green energy tax credits — "It looks a lot like the House bill, really," Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., told Politico's E&E News.

Which is not at all encouraging to Catholic environmental advocates.

"In terms of climate, it's terrible," declared Kayla Jacobs, program manager of Youth Mobilization for the Catholic Climate Covenant, a nationwide network of 20 partner

organizations established in 2006 with assistance from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"It will set us back, when — as a world — we are already pretty far back in terms of doing what we need to do to address the climate crisis," Jacobs told OSV News. "We're praying really hard and doing all we can to influence the Senate to realize that."

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Catholic Climate Covenant organized a June 25 effort to hand-deliver blessed copies of Laudato Si' — accompanied by personal letters — to all 148 Catholic members of Congress "to inspire," they stated, "renewed moral leadership on climate action in alignment with the teachings of the Catholic Church."

The House version of OBBBA dismantled almost all of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act. The IRA was the first legislation in more than a decade to address greenhouse gas emissions by providing a package of clean energy tax credits, loans, subsidies, and other incentives to consumers and corporations alike.

Opponents of the cuts have — with some success — pointed to IRA economic benefits, including more than 400,000 announced new clean energy jobs and over $422 billion in investments across 48 states and Puerto Rico, according to strategic communications organization Climate Power.

"Most of the clean energy projects and jobs are located in Congressional districts represented by Republicans — 405 clean energy projects and 216,322 jobs, respectively," noted Climate Power in a January 2025 report. "Of the top 10 states for new clean energy jobs, half have Republican governors welcoming the local investments."

Under OBBBA, the IRA incentives originally designed to extend for years could instead face much earlier retirement dates — but with more flexibility under the Senate OBBBA version, more green energy projects may still be able to access the federal funding before credits and subsidies fully sunset.

Wind and solar projects, however, would begin to phase out next year.

"Trends in extreme weather events and social vulnerability are such that there is an ongoing need to invest in the current and future resilience of communities worldwide, including the United States," Danielle Wood, director of ND-GAIN, the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative at the University of Notre Dame, told OSV News. "Disinvesting in socio-environmental concerns, such as thoughtful interventions and the data and analysis that support them, will serve to compound environmental challenges and human suffering."

> "They are trying to say that we don't have proof that the chemical industry is poisoning us. Yes, we do have proof," Sharon Lavigne said. "People are dying. That's the proof. The proof is the funerals every week."
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Archbishop Borys Gudziak, chair of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, writing in OSV News June 12, noted OBBBA "backs out of crucial investments in clean energy and jobs, air and water." Inventorying that development with the bill's other cuts, Gudziak concluded, "This would be unacceptable and unconscionable."

While obviously still focused on Congress, advocates are modifying their tactics.

"We do have to adjust part of our advocacy and legislative work, to focus more time and energy on our partners on the state level," Jacobs said. "Because there's just a higher chance of good things to protect the environment on the state level than on the federal level."

Reba Elliott, a member of the senior leadership team and senior director for Global Advocacy at the Laudato Si' Movement, a global network of over 900 Catholic organizations and over 10,000 trained grassroots leaders, likewise finds OBBBA a disappointment.

"It is a tragedy that some of the people in our Congress who claimed to have strong moral values are actually voting to harm us here in the United States, and people around the world," she said.

Elliott suggested America's diminished involvement could be particularly noticeable at the upcoming United Nations Climate Conference, COP 30, this November in

Bélem, Brazil.

"The U.S. is missing out on assuming this crucial role of moral leadership in the world. COP 30 will happen — and the negotiators from around the world know that the U.S. is abdicating its moral leadership position," Elliott said. "That leaves a vacuum for other people to step up — and we're so grateful that the Holy See, for example, is a party to the Paris climate agreement."

The U.S., which has the largest economy in the world, is no longer part of that agreement, having been withdrawn by President Trump in January 2025. The multi-nation pact is aimed at limiting the global rise in temperatures, which in turn fuels severe changes in the climate.

Elliott further characterized certain provisions of OBBBA as "cruel."

"It proposes eliminating the reduction of air pollution in schools, especially in areas that need it most. Members of Congress ... are leaving kids to suffer the effects of polluted air," Elliott said. "This is not a moral position — and it's one that people of faith frankly aren't sitting down and taking."

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One of those people of faith is Sharon Lavigne — founder, CEO, and director of the faith-based environmental advocacy group Rise St. James — named in 2024 as one of TIME Magazine's "100 Most Influential People in the World."

Lavigne, a lifelong resident of St. James Parish, a civil jurisdiction about an hour's drive from New Orleans, is a member of St. James Church, a predominantly Black Catholic church in the Diocese of Baton Rouge with a 250-year history. She founded Rise St. James in 2018, in Louisiana's ruefully nicknamed "Cancer Alley."

The 85-mile corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is home to more than 150 oil refineries, plastics plants, and chemical facilities, 32 of which are in St. James Parish.

The "Cancer Alley" moniker also reflects the relentless concern of Lavigne and her neighbors about emissions from these industrial facilities in a place identified as "the largest hotspot of cancer-causing air in the country."

Among the provisions of the original House version of OBBBA is a section repealing program funding for incentives to monitor and reduce air pollution and greenhouse gasses.

"I can't stress the point enough for people to understand — but the people that are approving these bills, a lot of them don't live in Cancer Alley," Lavigne told OSV News. "A lot of them don't live around all of this pollution. So they don't care."

For those who doubt, Lavigne has strong words.

"They are trying to say that we don't have proof that the chemical industry is poisoning us. Yes, we do have proof," she said. "People are dying. That's the proof. The proof is the funerals every week."

According to Devin Lowell, a clinical assistant professor of law at Tulane University's Environmental Law Clinic in New Orleans, which has previously represented Rise St. James, the St. James monitoring site the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality began operating in April 2024 has received federal funds from the Environmental Protection Agency.

"My understanding is that LDEQ established this site with three years' worth of funding from EPA," said Lowell.

It's unclear what impact the OBBBA might have upon the St. James monitoring station; but Lavigne is adamant about the need to test, and unsparing in her assessment of the legislators involved.

"These politicians don't care; they're in the pockets of industry. And they're trying to silence the activists. But you can't track it if you don't monitor it," she said. "That means that we already die — and we can die some more."