

2016-33: Penna vs Toronto Star

*For immediate release*

The National NewsMedia Council has dismissed a complaint from Pav Penna that a Toronto Star article on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, “America’s first ‘climate refugees’”, incorrectly claims climate change as the primary contributing cause for the need to relocate Isle de Jean Charles citizens. It also dismissed the complaint that the news media organization failed to take responsibility for corrections to a wire service article.

The complainant provided extensive background and research materials related to sea levels, climate study, and previous New York Times articles. He argued that the NYT article that appeared in the Star does not give enough weight to subsidence, and quoted National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration measurements that show “relative sea level is rising almost 10 millimeters per year in Louisiana partially because the land is also subsiding.”

The complainant also alleged that the New York Times presents “alarmist” stories that support NOAA. The Council declines to comment on that aspect of the complaint.

In its response, the Star pointed out that the article clearly states more than 90 per cent of the island was lost before relocation was contemplated, and relies on a statement from the National Climate Assessment report that rising sea levels make Isle de Jean Charles among the most vulnerable of populations.

The paper also noted that the article is from the Star's New York Times wire services, and that the Star does not correct wire content without consulting the source. It agrees with the New York Times decision against a correction on the article.

In considering the complaint, Council found the article makes clear that past and ongoing rising sea levels are the cause for the relocation of the citizens of Isle de Jean Charles when it states that “Channels cut by loggers and oil companies eroded much of the island, and decades of flood control efforts have kept once free-flowing rivers from replenishing the wetlands’ sediments. Some of the island was swept away by hurricanes.”

In dismissing the complaint, Council notes that journalistic standards require the news media to present balance in reporting, but it also notes that presenting balance in cases such as climate change or vaccinations includes noting that the great majority of science and expertise rests on one side of the issue.

The NNC is a forum for journalism standards and cannot serve as an arena for assessment of or debate on deep science. It is not reasonable for every news article to delve deeply into complex science in order to present both sides of an issue. Journalists and editors have the discretion to cite or rely on sources of their choice.

Journalistic standards related to fairness and balance have been satisfied in the article's noting of factors such as subsidence and channel cutting. Council finds this is a reasonable balance considering the weight of scientific and expert views.

The complainant states the article supports climate change and rising sea level by reporting that residents describe the land as being "flooded", "sinking into the sea" and "the rising waters". Council finds these words and phrases could be understood by a reasonable reader to illustrate the issue of water where there used to be land, whether caused by land sinking or water rising.

Regarding the complaint about accuracy of wire copy, Council finds the news media organization exercised due diligence by consulting with the wire service about the accuracy of statements in the article. It confirmed that, contrary to the complainant's allegation, there was no statement that climate change is the only reason for changes on Isle de Jean Charles.

Council finds no breach of journalistic practices or standards and therefore dismisses the complaint.