

Analysis: Harvey Triggered Release of Nearly a Million Pounds of Toxic Air Pollutants

"Oil-industry facilities spewed thousands of tons of toxic chemicals into defenseless communities, despite ample warning about hurricane risk to this area."

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Featured image: Texas refineries and petrochemical plants affected by Hurricane Harvey have released nearly 1 million pounds of seven dangerous air pollutants, and upwards of 2 million pollutants overall, according to industry data. (Photo: [IIP Photo Archive](#)/flickr/cc)

Texas refineries and petrochemical plants affected by Hurricane Harvey have released nearly a million pounds of seven especially dangerous air pollutants, according to a new analysis released Friday.

"Staggering amounts of benzene, 1,3-butadiene, hexane, hydrogen sulfide, sulfur dioxide, toluene, and xylene—estimated at 951,000 pounds so far—were emitted" at "several dozen petroleum industry facilities," the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) [said](#) in a statement.

According to the group,

"these seven chemicals are all toxic air pollutants documented to cause serious harms to human health, and several cause cancer."

The analysis is based on initial industry reports submitted to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality through August 31, and the group said it expects these numbers to continue to rise in the coming days.

Expressing concern for communities in the immediate vicinities of the facilities, Shaye Wolf, the scientist who compiled the analysis, said:

"Oil-industry facilities spewed thousands of tons of toxic chemicals into defenseless communities, despite ample warning about hurricane risk to this area."

"Dangerous flaring from coastal refineries has become routine during major storms," Wolf added. "The petroleum industry seems utterly unwilling to take responsibility for operating safely, even as climate change makes storms like Harvey more destructive."

"Long before Harvey made landfall, environmental groups and scientists had

been [warning of the disastrous effects](#) that could result from a massive storm like Harvey hitting Texas, the heart of the U.S. petrochemical industry,” Common Dreams previously [reported](#).

The CBD analysis confirms alarming [first-hand reports](#) that started pouring out of Texas earlier this week.

Overall, refineries and petrochemical facilities “may have released as much as 2 million pounds of potentially hazardous airborne pollutants from oil refineries and other facilities in the Houston area,” *NBC News* [reported](#) on Wednesday.

“In one of the largest accidental releases, Chevron Phillips Chemical reported that it may have released more than 745,000 pounds of contaminants into the air as it shut down its Cedar Bayou Plant in Baytown, Texas,” *NBC News* noted.

“At least [25 plants](#) have either shut down or experienced production issues” because of Harvey, *Grist* [reported](#), and not all the hazardous emissions are the result of storm damage. In fact, a notable amount of troubling emissions has come from several facilities closing ahead of the storm. As *Grist* explained:

Petrochemical plant shutdowns are a major cause of abnormal emission events. The short-term impacts of these events can be “substantial,” according to a 2012 [report](#) from the Environmental Integrity Project, because “upsets or sudden shutdowns can release large plumes of sulfur dioxide or toxic chemicals in just a few hours, exposing downwind communities to peak levels of pollution that are much more likely to trigger asthma attacks and other respiratory systems.”

Air Alliance Houston’s Executive Director Bakeyah Nelson is concerned about how these shutdowns will affect nearby communities already suffering from Harvey. “The excess amount of air pollution puts communities in close proximity to these plants at risk, especially people with chronic health conditions,” she said. She also noted that communities closest to these sites in Houston—and in general—are disproportionately [low-income and minority](#). Some residents have already been complaining of [“unbearable” petrochemical-like smells](#)

On Thursday, two explosions—followed by [“plumes of black smoke”](#)—were [reported](#) at an Arkema chemical plant in Crosby, Texas.

After the explosions, Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez was heavily [criticized](#) for claiming the plumes did not contain toxins and were not dangerous to the community—even though residents within a 1.5-mile radius of the plant were forced to evacuate and urged to “seek medical advice” if they were exposed to the smoke.

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