

Hurricane Harvey: An Environmental Nightmare, America's Neglected Infrastructure

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Natural disasters like Hurricane Harvey are greatly exacerbated by America's neglected infrastructure nationwide – a deplorable situation unaddressed by Republicans and undemocratic Democrats alike for decades.

Poor maintenance, aging pipe networks installed up to a century ago, and lack of proper drainage facilities in flood-prone cities like Houston, New Orleans, and Chicago's downtown Loop, along with poor communities in these and other cities left especially vulnerable, make disasters like Katrina and Harvey far worse than otherwise if proper protections were in place.

They're not nationwide. America's neglected infrastructure bears much of the blame for Houston's epic disaster – worsening as rain keeps falling, making landfall a second time west of Cameron, LA, heavy rain hitting the state's coastal areas.

The National Weather Service issued a flash flood emergency, its severest flood alert. Millions of Texas and Louisiana residents vulnerable. Rainfall in Houston already exceeds 50 inches.

By Tuesday afternoon, an estimated 444 square miles were flooded, an area six times the size of Washington, DC. Shocking, and things keep worsening as rain keeps falling – lightly in Houston, not torrentially like earlier, but floodwaters are still rising.

According to Rice University Environmental Engineering Professor Phil Bedient,

"Houston is the most flood-prone city in the United States. No one is even a close second – not even New Orleans, because at least they have pumps there."

Rice University Environmental Law Professor Jim Blackburn said Houston's system is designed to drain only up to 12 or 13 inches of rain per 24-hour period. It's "so obsolete it's just unbelievable," he stressed.

Houston's Harris County has the nation's least-regulated drainage policy, according to Bedient. Reservoirs overflowed. Water pressing against 70-year-old dams was released,

worsening downstream flooding.

Houston's storm drain and pipe system is minimal compared to other cities. Overdevelopment eliminating green space exacerbated what's ongoing.

Chairman of Residents Against Flooding Ed Browne said area politicians bend to the will of developers. Whatever they want they get.

According to Bedient, the way Houston is governed created "a perfect mix for the perfect storm. And that's why we flood so often" – though never before like now.

The calamity is hugely aggravated by damaged oil refineries and fuel facilities along the Texas Gulf coast – releasing millions of pounds of toxic chemicals into the air and water, creating a serious health hazard for area residents.

Releases include carcinogenic benzene and nitrogen oxide. Texas environment director Luke Metzger warned that

"(i)t's adding to the cancer risk to the community and well as respiratory problems."

Area refineries and plants account for about 25% of America's refining capacity, over 40% of its ethylene production, and more than half of its jet fuel.

The Gulf Coast is home to around half of the nation's chemical manufacturing facilities. Hazardous gases were emitted during plant shutdowns.

The effects on human health won't be known for some time. Exposure to toxins causes cancer and other diseases.

It's just a matter of how many local residents will be harmed – besides damage or loss of homes and personal possessions.

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