

Toxic Pollution From Hurricanes Harvey and Irma

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Featured image: A tugboat Signet Enterprise with its crew — later rescued — is partially submerged near a refinery in Port Aransas, Texas, on Aug. 26, 2017. (Source: [The Intercept](#))

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Hurricanes cause more than flooding, damage, and economic hardships for affected people. They unleash huge amounts of harmful to health toxins, taking a toll long after recovery from storms.

The Texas Gulf coast suffers from millions of pounds of toxic chemicals released into the air and water, including carcinogenic benzene and nitrogen oxide.

According to Earthjustice's Emma Cheuse,

"the EPA created some specific exemptions that still allow unlimited releases of toxic pollution during certain time periods."

"Those exemptions are really relevant to what we're seeing now. It's likely that refineries will rely on calling this a force majeure incident to avoid sanction."

"Communities need more protection than just having refineries say this is a force majeure event and having the EPA rubber stamp that."

"In finalizing new national standards in December, EPA created hazardous malfunction exemptions that give oil companies one or two free passes to pollute uncontrollably every three years, and a complete pass to pollute whenever they lose power or have some other 'force majeure' event."

They apply to unforeseen events. During hurricane season in America's Gulf and along the eastern seaboard, storms happen. They're expected. The only unknown is where they'll strike.

Benzene is highly carcinogenic. So are other oil and chemical industry toxins. Force majeure exemptions let companies pollute with impunity.

Hurricane Harvey flooded at least five highly contaminated Houston area Superfund sites.

It "muddied the region's water and air with toxic chemicals, smog-forming pollution and raw sewage, creating the potential for serious health risks," USA Today reported.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality reported at least 80 toxic spills from sewage and wastewater systems.

Advocacy group Environment Texas reported about 36 toxic chemical spills from industrial facilities. A Houston area air quality monitor measured 201 parts per billion of ozone pollution. Levels above 200 are hazardous to human health.

Spills could have included carcinogenic PCBs. Water pollution threatens Gulf Coast residents long after floodwaters recede.

According to Environment Texas director Luke Metzger,

“(i)f people are cleaning up and trying to begin the repair of their homes, they may still be encountering contaminated water” and get sick.

Drinking water in many areas is unsafe. Boiling kills harmful organisms, not toxic chemicals, compounds, salts, and heavy metals.

Raw sewage is Hurricane Irma’s main pollutant. Bloomberg News explained

“(m)illions of gallons of poorly treated wastewater and raw sewage flowed into the bays, canals and city streets of Florida from facilities serving some of the nation’s fastest-growing counties.”

“More than 9 million gallons of releases tied to Irma have been reported as of late Tuesday as inundated plants were submerged, forced to bypass treatment or lost power.”

Disease-causing pathogens contaminated areas affected by floodwaters. Electrical outages caused lift station pumps to stop running in St. Petersburg and Orlando.

In Miramar, Hollywood, north of Miami, a pipeline burst, spilling raw sewage. A power outage caused a Miami wastewater treatment plant to release six million gallons of raw sewage into Biscayne Bay.

Releases of sewage and other toxins from Harvey and Irma continue, an environmental nightmare, a serious health hazard to residents of affected areas.

Aging infrastructure in high-growth parts of Texas and Florida struggles to keep up with demands of increasing numbers of residents over-stressing facilities – creating hazards during normal times.

According to Miami Waterkeeper director Kelly Cox,

“(y)ou throw a hurricane on top of that, and you are starting to see a lot more problems.”

Harvey and Irma toxins will continue taking their toll on human health long after clean-up and rebuilding are completed.

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