

U.S.

# Houston's Environmental Threats Come Into Focus

As Harvey's flooding recedes, risk of toxic pollutants tests health inspectors



Jesus Ramirez removed the wood floors from his home damaged by floodwaters Monday in Houston. PHOTO: DAVID J. PHILLIP/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Douglas Belkin and Tawnell D. Hobbs*

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HOUSTON—Water is subsiding in flooded neighborhoods, the mayor is insisting Houston “is open for business,” and shelters are emptying out, but Texans returning to flood-damaged homes face plenty of obstacles: the threat of toxic pollutants in the air and drinking water, and even hungry, dislocated animals seeking shelter.

On Monday, authorities lifted an evacuation order in Crosby, site of the Arkema Inc. chemical plant about 25 miles northeast of Houston. Containers of the chemicals, which are unstable if not kept refrigerated, started igniting on Thursday after power outages cut off cooling systems. On Monday, the company said the Crosby Fire Department had lifted a 1.5-mile evacuation zone around the plant, allowing neighbors to return to their homes.

But concerns about the long-term environmental damage to the area remain high, and the Houston Health Department is overwhelmed. The two employees who routinely test the city’s

waterways aren't enough to quickly monitor the storm's effects across Houston's vast network of bayous, said Loren Raun, chief environmental science officer for the health department.

"It's too big of a problem," Ms. Raun said. "We really need to be sampling everywhere."

Floodwaters also have inundated at least five toxic-waste Superfund sites near Houston, and some may be damaged, though Environmental Protection Agency officials have yet to assess the full extent of what occurred.

One of Ms. Raun's chief concerns is the threat of toxic pollutants from Houston's runoff reaching downstream industries and ecosystems, contaminating the soil and entering the air through evaporation.

The city's main waterway, the Buffalo Bayou, channels runoff from the surrounding 102 square miles into the Houston Shipping Channel. Those waters eventually make their way to the Gulf of Mexico, she said.

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That is why Ms. Raun emailed EPA officials Friday to request help taking and testing water samples near Superfund locations. An EPA official replied Friday to say he had forwarded her request to the agency's Regional Emergency Operations Center.

In the meantime, Houston Health Department air-inspection teams will begin to fan out Tuesday to monitor air quality around the city's petroleum and chemical manufacturers, targeting roughly 100 of the largest locations first, according to Donald Richner, senior project manager for the bureau of pollution control and prevention within the health department's environmental division.

"We'll start with them, because when they have a problem, it's usually bigger than anyone

else's," Mr. Richner said.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott told CNN the EPA is working on some of the hazardous sites already, but "they have restraints on their ability to check out some of them just simply because of the water."

Meanwhile, repairs continued on the water-treatment plant in Beaumont, about 85 miles from Houston, which failed after the swollen Neches River inundated the main intake system and backup pumps halted. Outside the town of Liberty, about 45 miles from Houston, dozens of people were still cut off by the swollen Trinity River. A Texas National Guard helicopter landed at the local fire department with pallets of drinking water.

About 2,800 evacuees remained in Houston's megashelter at the NRG Center on Monday—from a high of about 10,000, according to a spokeswoman at the convention center. Victims are being consolidated from other smaller shelters, and many others have returned home.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said much of the city was hoping to get back on track after Labor Day, some 10 days after Hurricane Harvey made landfall.

“Anyone who was planning on a conference or a convention or a sporting event or a concert coming to this city, you can still come,” the mayor told CBS on Sunday. “We can do multiple things at the same time.”

Mr. Turner posted on Twitter that he would announce Tuesday whether to end the citywide curfew that runs from midnight to 5 a.m., and he has asked businesses affected by the curfew to remain patient.



Jenny Killingsworth, right, held the hand of Janeah Tieman, 10, while helping clean up a home damaged by floodwaters in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston on Monday. PHOTO: DAVID J. PHILLIP/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“It has helped to maintain the public safety during some very stressful times,” Mr. Turner said during a news conference Saturday. Shelter workers and people traveling to and from work are exempt from the curfew.

Mr. Abbott previously said the state might need more than \$125 billion in aid, but on Sunday he revised that figure, comparing the storm's damage to that of Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf Coast in 2005.

“Katrina caused, if I recall, more than \$120 billion [in damage] but when you look at the number of homes and business affected by this, I think this will cost well over \$120 billion, probably \$150 billion to \$180 billion,” he said in an interview with Fox News.

Harvey slammed into Texas on Aug. 25 as a Category 4 hurricane, but it brought the worst flooding to Houston and other areas as a tropical storm. The rain totaled nearly 52 inches. On Monday, the Houston Chronicle reported that the number of people missing or dead in connection to the storm is now 75.

In other storm-ravaged neighborhoods, people worried about thefts.

Police in Bellaire, southwest of downtown Houston, received reports of people picking through water-damaged possessions and urged those cleaning up to keep anything left outside to dry closer to their homes and separate from what was considered a total loss, the Associated Press reported.

In other parts of the region, residents were being threatened by a different kind of intruder.

“We have everything from snakes to alligators to fire ants,” said Lach Mullen, spokesman for the Office of Emergency Management in Fort Bend County, southwest of Houston. “Even though evacuation orders have been lifted, people have to be wary of new occupants in their homes. They don’t want to occupy the same space as you; they will leave on their own when they can.”

—*Melanie Evans contributed to this article.*

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