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RICHARD GREENE

The truth and fiction of Hurricane Harvey's environmental effects

BY RICHARD GREENE

SEPTEMBER 08, 2017 5:22 PM



Flood waters have risen into the a West Houston neighborhood on Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2017.
TOM FOX *TNS*



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Among the devastation left behind by Hurricane Harvey are [environmental effects](#) that will require many months of work to completely measure and even more time to effect widespread recovery.

In the early going there are risks ranging from flood water contamination to pollutants left in the ground when the earth dries out, and emissions in the air from fires upset industrial facilities.

The herculean task of managing debris scattered over the Texas coast and throughout the cities overwhelmed with unimaginable wreckage of structures, either blown away or left unsalvageable. They will provide a decade's supply of rubble to overwhelm landfills of every type.

That all will have to be managed in a manner to ensure the disposal of that material doesn't pose a continuing risk to human health and the environment in years to come.

Household hazardous wastes, chemicals and poisons consisting of everything we keep under our counters inside our homes, and the fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides and the like in our garages must be collected from flooded properties, sorted and disposed of safely.

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Ruined refrigerators and their contents — along with other goods and the abundance of electronics throughout homes and businesses drowned by the historic rainfall — have to be rounded up, cleaned up, recycled or properly buried.

The predictable manner in which all this gets reported by the news media is to criticize the federal, state, and local agencies working around the clock to deal

with the catastrophic effects in a furious effort to protect the health of the population in the wake of the storm.

For reasons I've never been able to understand, there seems to be a belief that somehow this all is supposed to be resolved at once.

Or maybe there is some other motive in unsubstantiated reporting of failure when there is no such breakdown whatsoever.

Take for example the ridiculous story released by the Associated Press that the EPA and its state partner, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, were "not on the scene" to deal with the storm's effects on Superfund sites (properties undergoing remedial work to recover from past environmental contamination) in the area flooded by the hurricane.

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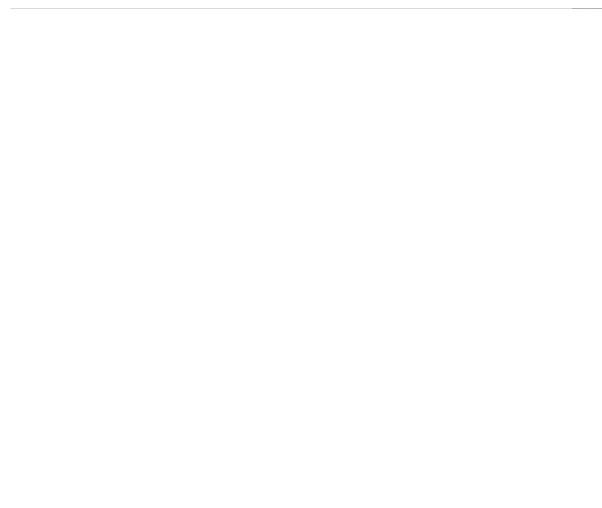
That [false reporting](#) led to immediate trashing of the Trump administration as negligent, and evidence of how the EPA had been weakened since the last election.

EPA Associate Administrator Liz Bowman set the record straight, saying all the Superfund properties in the affected area were being assessed by teams of experts on the ground working with state and local counterparts and declaring any reports to the contrary to be “[yellow journalism](#).”

TCEQ provided complete information on exactly what has been done to deal with each and every site and the measures taken to protect communities from any exposure to harm.

In fact, [robust communication](#) as to the status of the work being conducted by the federal-state partnership consisting of hundreds of personnel skilled and experienced in dealing with the environmental effects is being updated daily.

Whether it's the condition of drinking water, the operations of wastewater treatment plants, hazards in remaining floodwaters, air quality (concentrations well below levels of health concerns), fires at the Arkema Facility, refineries, and much more is all available with a few clicks on the agencies websites.



Instead of alarming the public with concocted reports of nonexistent problems, wouldn't it better serve our interest to get some truth and, where applicable, reassurance that everything that can be done to restore the health of the environment is underway and moving forward every hour of every day?

The answer is obvious to everyone. Except those, perhaps, with motives to achieve some other purpose.

Richard Greene is a former Arlington mayor and served as an appointee of President George W. Bush as regional administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency.

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