

# Watchdog to investigate flood risks to Superfund sites

January 5 2018, by Michael Biesecker And Jason Dearen

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In this Aug. 31, 2017 file photo, a barbed-wire fence encircles the Highlands Acid Pit that was flooded by water from the nearby San Jacinto River as a result from Harvey in Highlands, Texas. A federal government watchdog agency will investigate the threats from flooding and other natural disasters to the nation's most polluted places. The Government Accountability Office told members of Congress it was assigning investigators to study risks to human health and the environment that natural disasters pose to the more than 1,300 sites in the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program. (AP Photo/Jason Dearen, File)

A federal government watchdog agency will investigate the threats from flooding and other natural disasters to the nation's most polluted places.

The Government Accountability Office told members of Congress it was assigning investigators to study the risks to human health and the environment that natural disasters pose to the more than 1,300 sites in the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program.

The study, which comes after a historic hurricane season that inundated major cities and caused billions of dollars in damage, also seeks to determine what the federal government can do about it.

The GAO's letter, dated Dec. 21, was in response to 10 senators—nine Democrats and an independent—who earlier in December requested a study of risk to the sites posed by natural disasters intensified by climate change.

That request followed reporting by The Associated Press in September that more than a dozen Superfund sites were flooded by heavy rains as Hurricane Harvey struck the Houston area.

A subsequent AP review of EPA records and Census data revealed that more than 2 million Americans live within a mile of 327 Superfund sites in flood zones or areas at risk from rising sea levels.

"The United States has seen a steady increase in both the frequency and destructive force from natural disasters over the last several decades. Many of these increases are being exacerbated by the effects of climate change," the letter from the senators stated. "Sea level rise will increase the frequency and extent of extreme flooding associated with coastal storms."

In 2012, the Obama administration's EPA assessed some of the at-risk

Superfund sites, and was planning to guard them from harsher weather and rising seas. EPA's 2014 Climate Adaptation Plan noted that prolonged flooding at low-lying Superfund sites could cause extensive erosion, carrying away contaminants as waters recede.

President Donald Trump, however, has called climate change a hoax, and his administration has worked to remove references from federal reports and websites.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt appointed a task force that developed a list of high-priority Superfund sites at which cleanup would be expedited. But the task force's 34-page report makes no mention of flood risks from stronger storms or rising seas, even though eight of the 21 sites on EPA's priority list are in flood-prone areas.

EPA spokesman Jahan Wilcox declined Friday to comment on GAO's review before it is complete.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Public Interest Research Group, an environmental organization, said the investigation was overdue.

"It's outrageous that we don't already know if Superfund sites are secure and, based on investigations by the AP and the EPA, it's probable there were releases after Hurricane Harvey," Kara Cook-Schultz said. "It's possible some of these sites are unsafe and it's past time for this investigation."

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