

EPA watchdog probing air-quality results issued after Harvey

August 2 2018, by Michael Biesecker

An internal watchdog at the Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday it will review whether federal and state officials kept the public appropriately informed last year about potential air quality threats after Hurricane Harvey ravaged southeastern Texas.

The office of EPA Inspector General Arthur Elkins issued notice of the audit, which will scrutinize the agency's response following several high-profile accidents and spills following the August 2017 storm and the resulting flooding in the Houston metro area.

Jennifer Kaplan, a spokeswoman for Elkins, said the review was initiated internally, and not as a result of a request from Congress or any whistleblower complaints.

As nearby residents complained of noxious smells and burning eyes and throats in the days after the storm, EPA and [state officials](#) repeatedly cited government air monitoring results to assure the public that post-Harvey air pollution posed no health threat.

But The Associated Press and The Houston Chronicle reported in March that government records revealed far more widespread toxic impact than authorities publicly reported in the days and weeks after the storm. Massive amounts of benzene, vinyl chloride, butadiene and other known human carcinogens were among the toxic substances released into surrounding neighborhoods and waterways following Harvey's torrential rains.

Kaplan said the review will encompass the response to the explosions and fire at a Arkema Inc. chemical plant in Crosby, a big benzene [spill](#) at Royal Dutch Shell PLC 's Deer Park complex, spills of sodium hydroxide and benzene from a Chevron Phillips Chemical Co. plant in Baytown, and a huge gasoline spill at Magellan Midstream's Galena Park terminal east of Houston.

According to its letter , the inspector general's office will examine whether officials from EPA and Texas state agencies properly addressed potential high-risk areas and whether air quality monitoring indicated any potential health concerns. Also under review is whether those air monitoring results and any associated health concerns were "accurately communicated to the public."

Samuel Coleman, who was the EPA's acting regional administrator during Harvey, told The AP and The Chronicle earlier this year that the priority in the immediate aftermath of the storm was "addressing any environmental harms as quickly as possible as opposed to making announcements about what the problem was."

In hindsight, Coleman said, it might not have been a bad idea to inform the public about the worst of "dozens of spills."

EPA's press office did not respond Thursday to emails seeking comment about the [inspector general](#)'s review.

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