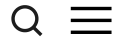




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TISHMAN CENTER · AUGUST 31, 2017

Environmental Justice Threats in Houston Exacerbated by Hurricane Harvey



Houston

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07:18

By [Ana Baptista](#)

In March of this year, I had the opportunity to visit Houston as part of a delegation of the Coalition for Healthy Ports from the New York, New Jersey region to attend the national coalition meeting of the [Moving Forward Network](#). This network of small, grassroots organizations from around the country tackle some of the most complex and dirtiest pollution conglomerates in the form of the goods movement industry. This is the industry that powers our high tech lives and our consumer habits by shipping consumer products and the petrochemicals that make them via seaports, highways, pipelines, railways and shipping channels. These sacrifice zones are present across the globe but often hidden in plain sight. But for the low income, communities of color that live on the fenceline, there is no escaping their impact.

During our convening, we were privileged to participate in a Toxic Tour hosted by local activists from the [Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services \(TEJAS\)](#), led by Juan Parras, their executive director. I expected to see in Houston many of the same images I'd seen in the ports of Long Beach and LA on the west coast or my own backyard in the largest east coast ports in Newark and Elizabeth in New Jersey. But what I witnessed in Houston and the surrounding communities of Harrisburg, Manchester, Galena Park, Bellaire, and the entire east end of the Houston Metro area was unlike anything I'd seen before. For as far as the eye could see and the nose could smell, stretched a twenty-five-mile wall of belching petrochemical companies and refineries in low lying areas along the coast, surrounded by small, single family dwellings. The world's largest petrochemical companies are based in these tiny annexed towns outside of Houston proper's purview. These vulnerable EJ communities face harrowing conditions. We heard stories of chemical explosions, oil leaks

constant odors and releases, and even residents being penned in, trapped by miles long railcars carrying chemicals, unable to reach help in times of emergency.

A SLIDE SHOW FROM THE TOXIC TOUR

TEJAS leaders also pointed out the constant danger of flooding and the recent results of water testing that found toxics in drainage ditches and pooled water in and around public parks and local streets. The potential for contaminated flood waters, chemical explosions, and releases from nearby facilities and lack of adequate evacuation routes combined to make this one of the most perilous places to live, work, and play in the nation. The Union of Concerned Scientists recently released the findings of a study undertaken with TEJAS called [Double Jeopardy in Houston: Acute and Chronic Chemical Exposures Pose Disproportionate Risks for Marginalized Communities](#) and they concluded that communities of color and low-income communities in this area face higher risks from accidents and chemical exposures.

But more staggering than the sheer magnitude of disproportionate pollution and public health impacts these communities face is the magnitude of the political and economic obstacles that groups like TEJAS confront in their struggles for environmental justice. From local municipal government on up through the state and regional authorities, government and political actors have largely failed to protect and represent the most vulnerable communities in this region. They have abdicated their responsibilities to regulate or even intervene in the slightest way to check

the power of global petrochemical companies.

Yet despite these obstacles, grassroots organizations like TEJAS and the local residents and leaders in the communities hardest hit persevere.

Seeing the heart-wrenching images of Hurricane Harvey, I am reminded of the children and families that live in Manchester and pray that they are safe. Journalists more concerned with the impact of Harvey on our oil and gas prices neglect to mention the human toll that this infrastructure has exacted for generations on those most vulnerable among us who are not just paying a few extra cents at the pump but being poisoned and dispossessed of their homes.

Harvey, like Katrina, Sandy and the Flint disasters before it, should serve as a reminder that much of the devastation from these storms stems from systemic, entrenched forms of injustice that are only exacerbated and made visible in times of crisis. Better environmental regulations and environmental justice laws, protective land use and zoning, chemical security, economic and public health investments, eliminating fossil fuels and toxic products, zero waste, these are just some of the big and small asks that groups like TEJAS have been fighting for and will continue to demand. You can lend your support to their efforts by donating [on their website](#), and committing long term solidarity in their efforts to raise these issues long after the images of Harvey fade from the spotlight.

I want to say a special thank you to Juan Parras, his wife Ana and his son Bryan along with Yvette Arellano and Yudith Nieto who shared their stories and their struggles on that Toxic Tour in March and who are working tirelessly in service of their communities.

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