

EPA finds damage at Superfund site from Hurricane Harvey

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Updated 9:14 am, Friday, September 29, 2017



The Environmental Protection Agency late Thursday confirmed the fears of citizens and environmental activists that Hurricane Harvey flooding spawned a leak in one of the most dangerous and vulnerable of Houston's Superfund sites - the San Jacinto Waste Pits.

The pits, along Interstate 10 between Channelview and Highlands in eastern Harris County, hold wastes deposited there for decades from a paper mill - including dioxin, one of the most powerful known human carcinogens.

DAMAGE: EPA says Harvey may have flooded 13 sites

In a study of the site, Sam Brody, a Texas A & M professor had predicted that a powerful flood like that caused by Harvey could cause a rupture that would spill toxins into the San Jacinto River with the same power as a loaded gun. A resident of the badly flooded riverbottom near Channelview had taken a drone video that appeared to show damage.

But the EPA and spokesmen for the company overseeing the clean-up had previously claimed

that there appeared to be no rupture of an armored cap at the site.

A sample from one of the fourteen areas tested at the Superfund site found dioxins at 70,000 ng/kg, the agency said on Thursday. The recommended clean up level from the EPA for the site is 30 ng/kg.

The sample showed the protective cap had been damaged and underlying waste material was exposed.

Neighborhoods around the dioxin pits received a wall of water after Harvey's floods - particularly hard-hit were the riverbottom neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the pits, where homes were knocked off their foundations, filled with silt and slammed into sink holes.

AFTER HARVEY: EPA chief vows bold response

EPA now has ordered both International Paper and Industrial Maintenance Corporation to conduct supplemental sampling to make sure the exposed waste material is isolated.

The dioxin in the waste material does not dissolve easily but its possible that it could migrate out further into the surrounding sediments, the agency said. The supplemental sampling will conclude the extent, if any, of the migration.

EPA could send out additional visual dive operations if they feel its necessary, to check for displacement in the stone cover of the protective cap and evaluate it for further damage caused by the storm.

Harris County assistant county attorney Rock Owens, who has sued over past problems at the pits, said: "The latest breach in the cap discussed in the EPA's press release is proof positive that a cap won't work. During Harvey the cap failed again and dioxin was once more exposed to the River. With the EPA scheduled to announce the final remedy (or ROD) in just a few weeks we hope this latest incident finally puts this matter to rest. The dioxin must come out!"

Jackie Young, who grew up in the nearby Highlands and is founder of a grass-roots group of activists called Texas Health and Environment Alliance, expressed alarm that "unprecedented concentrations of highly toxic dioxin have been found uncontained in the river."

"Anyone who is under the impression that the temporary cap on the Pits remained intact through Harvey, is seriously misinformed," Young added. "The scary part about this is we have no way of knowing where all the contaminated material was carried by Harvey's floodwaters. Just imagine if we'd received storm surge; the community would've received a double dose of poison- waste carried north, then flushed south towards Galveston Bay."

The pits were used through the 1960s and 1970s and originally were located on river's west bank. But over time, the site has been repeatedly flooded. The pits were capped in 2011.

Hot-spots of cancer-causing dioxin, a byproduct of paper-making, previously have been found in a series of studies of the sediments in the San Jacinto River and in the Galveston Bay downstream, according to research conducted by the University of Houston.