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Organizations Call on EPA to Protect Communities from Climate-Driven Chemical Disasters

***Agency must strengthen and adapt Risk Management Program rules
to account for more frequent and extreme hurricanes, floods, wildfires***

Washington, DC — Three national environmental and scientific advocacy groups are releasing a [policy brief](#) today to respond to the call for information from the Biden administration on ways EPA should take stronger action to protect communities at risk of chemical disasters worsened by hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and other climate events.

The Center for Progressive Reform, Earthjustice, and the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a joint call for reform in the new policy brief, released one day before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) holds a virtual public listening session on preventing industrial chemical disasters in which the agency has requested information on climate risks and resilience.

The brief shows the public health and safety risks of "natech" disasters (when natural hazards, like storms and earthquakes, coincide with or contribute to infrastructure failures, like chemical plant spills and explosions), provides new data illustrating this problem, and urges the administration to take steps to better protect workers and fence-line communities.

A core finding of this new brief is that 3,856, or one-third of all regulated Risk Management Program chemical facilities, are sited in areas known to be prone to climate risks due to flooding, hurricanes, wildfires, or other extreme weather. As current data are not available on all natural disaster risks, this is a likely underestimate of the hazards. Therefore, the groups are calling on EPA to strengthen its Risk Management Program (RMP) by expanding coverage to more facilities and adapting it to require industrial chemical facilities to take account of and prepare for natural hazards worsened by climate change.

“It’s long past time to address these ‘double disasters,’” said David Flores, senior policy analyst at the Center for Progressive Reform. “As the global climate crisis intensifies, communities are increasingly at risk of natural disasters. When industrial facilities in these communities fail to adequately prepare for extreme storms, wildfires, heat waves, floods, rising sea levels, and other natural disasters, hazardous chemicals stored onsite can ignite and explode, sometimes causing dangerous and even catastrophic releases of toxic pollution that threaten the health and safety of workers and the public.”

EPA’s regulatory program neither addresses natural disasters, even though these are getting worse due to climate change, nor requires RMP facilities to take specific action to protect people from natech disasters or the cumulative and compounding hazardous exposures that can result.

“The problem is clear and endemic. Even officials from the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board and other independent safety experts have called for stronger action to prevent chemical disasters,” said Michelle Mabson, a staff scientist at Earthjustice. “Workers have cried out for action after being ‘locked in’ at inadequately prepared chemical facilities during hurricanes. Communities who live near major industrial sites have long endured threats from natural disasters and are also demanding reform.”

During the Obama years, EPA took some steps to strengthen the Risk Management Program, but the Trump administration rolled those efforts back at the behest of the chemical industry. The Biden administration plans to review the program and issue a new final rule by September 2023, though it is unclear what action it will take.

“New rules must not only restore Obama-era regulations but also strengthen them,” said Casey Kalman, a geospatial researcher at the Union of Concerned Scientists. “The Biden-Harris administration must require companies to take specific action to protect fence-line communities from rising threats. Our government must make critical reforms to safeguard against chemical disasters, which are worsened by facilities’ inadequate preparation for climate change and natural disasters. It is a matter of health, safety, equity, and justice.”

Quote from community leader in the Gulf region:

“We’ve lived with this problem for years, while EPA has ignored the worsening storms and worsening chemical disasters,” said Hilton Kelley, executive director of Community In-Power and Development Association, an organization from Port Arthur, Texas. “In the Gulf of Mexico and around the country, we regularly face double disasters as hurricanes or high winds and flooding hit our communities and neighboring chemical plants. It’s time for EPA to finally fix this problem by requiring natural disaster assessments and mitigation like back-up power in the federal regulations that industrial facilities have to follow, and this double disaster protection is an essential part of what we will be looking for in a new Chemical Disaster Rule from the new president and new EPA Administrator Regan.”

The organizations recommend that EPA require RMP facilities to:

- Assess natech or natural disaster-related risks and implement prevention and mitigation measures, like backup power and safer equipment and systems.
- Inform communities about natech emergency response plans.

- Involve workers and their representatives in natech preparedness and response practices.
- Monitor and collect toxic air emissions data in real time.

The organizations also call on EPA to:

- Expand RMP coverage to more facilities in areas prone to natural disasters.
- Build prompt implementation and compliance design into new rules.
- Take and support actions to invest in community protection, enforcement, and infrastructure that are responsive to climate, equity, and justice.

The brief is available online at <https://progressivereform.org/our-work/energy-environment/preventing-double-disasters/>.

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Earthjustice is the premier nonprofit environmental law organization. We wield the power of law and the strength of partnership to protect people's health, to preserve magnificent places and wildlife, to advance clean energy, and to combat climate change. We are here because the earth needs a good lawyer. For more information, visit <https://earthjustice.org>.

The Union of Concerned Scientists puts rigorous, independent science to work to solve our planet's most pressing problems. Joining with people across the country, we combine technical analysis and effective advocacy to create innovative, practical solutions for a healthy, safe, and sustainable future. For more information, go to www.ucsusa.org.