



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & COMMERCE
DEMOCRATS
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Pallone: EPA is Key in Responding to Natural Disasters like Hurricane Harvey

“Extreme budget and staff reductions will do nothing but undermine EPA’s efforts to protect human health and the environment.”

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing titled, “EPA Oversight: Unimplemented Inspector General and GAO Recommendations”*

Mr. Chairman, it’s been a week and a half since Hurricane Harvey hit Texas. As the scope of the environmental disaster only begins to become known, thousands remain displaced, their homes and businesses flooded.

I know firsthand of the immense devastation caused by such natural disasters. In 2012, my district was hit hard by Hurricane Sandy. I had never seen worse storm damage in our area in my lifetime. For many, the storm was a worst case scenario: lives lost, homes flooded, and businesses lost. Our nation is now experiencing historic levels of destruction and loss on the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

Our fellow members of Congress, including five members of the Texas delegation on this Committee, are working hard with federal, state, and local officials and first responders to help those affected by the storm. As the cleanup continues, many grave environmental and human health risks exist.

In the days since Hurricane Harvey came ashore, we have seen chemical plants on fire, fuel tanks leaking, mass releases of toxic pollutants into the air, and flooded federal Superfund sites.

I am deeply concerned of the potential risks to human health and the environment caused by exposure to the hazardous materials kept at these sites. This Committee must work to understand the impacts some of these facilities may have on public health. The Trump Administration recently delayed amendments to the Risk Management Program, which included safety requirements for companies to store large quantities of dangerous

chemicals. Moreover, the environmental issues resulting from the hurricane also underscore the need for robust implementation of the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act (EPCRA). Communities have a right to know important details about the type and amount of harmful chemicals released in their neighborhoods.

All of these risks underscore the need for a strong and capable Environmental Protection Agency.

Today we are discussing recommendations by the EPA Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) regarding the EPA. I want to thank our witnesses for their testimony and work on these recommendations.

However, I would argue that recommendations for improving EPA's performance are part of a much wider need to ensure that the agency is high-performing, efficient, and effective in accomplishing the agency's mission of protecting human health and the environment.

Over the last six months, EPA has been doing everything possible to operate in secrecy. Administrator Pruitt has no interest in transparency – and that should be unacceptable to every member of this Committee. Administrator Pruitt repeatedly disregards oversight inquiries from the Democrats on this Committee – and that should be unacceptable to anyone who believes we have an oversight responsibility.

The Trump EPA has proposed aggressive cuts to environment and human health protections, dismissed scientists from important advisory boards, and proposed severe budget and staffing reductions at EPA.

These actions, taken in totality, serve to directly undermine the agency's ability to effectively protect human health and the environment. A robust and effective EPA is key in responding to natural disasters like Hurricane Harvey. EPA currently has 143 personnel supporting the response efforts for Hurricane Harvey and has established a Unified Command with state and local partners. That number is going to increase dramatically in the coming weeks. At its peak, after Hurricane Katrina, about 1,600 EPA staff and contractors worked in the Gulf Coast region assisting with response and cleanup activities, in addition to thousands of additional EPA employees supporting response efforts from EPA headquarters and regional offices around the country. With the employee cuts and buyouts that the Administrator has proposed, we need to ensure that EPA will actually have the employees in place to conduct this critical work.

Mr. Chairman, I want to work with you to make sure we have a robust and effective EPA. The committee must conduct active oversight of the agency, particularly drinking water infrastructure and regulation, clean air protections, and the impacts of climate change. We must also conduct ongoing oversight over EPA and other agency's efforts to assist the Gulf coast rebuild.

The Trump administration's ongoing efforts to weaken environmental health protections, attack fundamental science, and propose extreme budget and staff reductions will do nothing but undermine EPA's efforts to protect human health and the environment.

Thank you and I yield back.

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