

# U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Needs to Improve Emergency Planning Resources During Future Disasters: Office of Inspector General Report

01/02/2020

The United States Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA") Office of Inspector General ("OIG") issued a report on December 16th titled:

*EPA Needs to Improve Its Emergency Planning to Better Address Air Quality Concerns During Future Disasters ("Report")*

The *Report* compiles the findings of an OIG-conducted audit of the air quality monitoring activities following 2017's Hurricane Harvey.

The activities were carried out by both Region 6 of EPA and the State of Texas.

The Houston metropolitan area was affected after Hurricane Harvey made landfall as a Category 4 storm on August 25, 2017. According to the *OIG Report*, most air toxic emission incidents related to the storm occurred within a 5-day period of time after its landfall. OIG found the responses of Texas and EPA to be deficient and insufficient as they related to air quality monitoring and reporting.

OIG stated the air monitors in the Houston area had been taken offline and secured prior to Harvey making landfall. This was done to prevent damage from occurring due to high winds, rain, and debris. Because these monitors were offline, they were unable to record emissions associated with industrial facilities shutting down and restarting operations in response to the storm.

The *Report* also found that once the air monitoring activities did begin, they did not generate appropriate data for making health-based assessments. OIG highlights the absence of guidance addressing air quality monitoring following an emergency as a primary shortcoming following.

EPA pushed back on the findings of the audit.

In a September 6, 2019 letter from the EPA Office of Land and Emergency Management, Assistant Administrator Peter Wright addressed the *OIG Report's* broad conclusions. He stated that EPA does not agree nor advise creating broadly-applicable monitoring guidance for emergency responses beyond those resources that already exist. Assistant Administrator Wright reasons that state and local governments are more appropriately situated to assess necessary response actions in their areas. Concern was expressed that developing overarching guidance for the host of emergency scenarios that could occur would be a difficult task.

Arkansas is no stranger to natural disasters. Several tornados occur every year. However, potential Arkansas natural disasters are not confined to wind events.

Arkansas recently experienced the worst flooding of the Arkansas River in nearly 30 years. The response to this historic flooding involved coordinated efforts of the Office of the Governor, the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management, the Division of Environmental Quality, the US Army Corp of Engineers, and several local government entities.

There is little doubt that natural disasters will continue to occur with regular and perhaps increased frequency throughout the country. We have seen recent instances of volcanic activity, forest fires, and landslides due to flooding. In that context, the *OIG Report* is timely.

A copy of the *OIG Report* can be accessed [here](#).