



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on October 7, 2024

Report: Toxic Exposure Risks Escalate After Helene's Floodwaters

Hurricane Helene, which struck the southeastern United States in late September, has sparked urgent concerns. Some of these concerns center around environmental and health risks caused by toxic chemicals released from industrial facilities submerged by floodwaters. The flooding heightens threats to drinking water, soil quality, and public health, as highlighted by Rice University researchers.

Though these researchers focus on climate change and social “equality” narratives, the dangers posed by submerged industrial sites should not be ignored. The federal government’s inefficiency in handling environmental disasters highlights the real dangers of toxic chemicals being released into communities. Despite the political framing, the critical issue remains the vulnerability of U.S. infrastructure. This should be a call to action for *local communities* to build resilience and take proactive steps in disaster preparedness, and not rely on government intervention. The lessons of Helene emphasize that communities must take responsibility now to protect themselves from future disasters.



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Industrial Contamination

Hurricane Helene swept across hundreds of industrial sites that store toxic pollutants. These sites include paper mills, fertilizer factories, and oil and gas storage facilities. According to [a recent report](#) by Rice University researchers, these facilities pose significant risks to nearby communities. Many of these sites store hazardous chemicals, like lead and spent nuclear fuel. Yet officials often obscure the details of these risks.

In Florida, a retired nuclear power plant experienced a storm surge of up to 12 feet, which inundated its wastewater ponds. While officials claimed that the spent nuclear fuel remained secure, the event echoes past events. Similar incidents occurred during [Hurricane Idalia](#) in 2023. And a year earlier, Hurricane Ian in 2022 caused toxic releases [visible from space](#).

Further inland, Helene dropped over a foot of rain on industrial sites in the Carolinas and Tennessee. These mountainous areas, especially places like Asheville, North Carolina, are less understood from a hydrology standpoint, say the researchers. That means experts have limited knowledge about how



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floodwaters behave in these regions compared to coastal areas. Yet the fast-moving floodwaters in these highland regions increased the risks of chemical runoff, raising local concerns about the long-term impacts on water safety and soil contamination.

Historical Patterns

The Rice University report highlighted that pollution releases during hurricanes are not uncommon. For instance, Hurricane Ida in 2021 triggered more than 2,000 chemical spills. Hurricane Harvey in 2017 caused chemical facilities near Houston to catch fire, releasing pollutants into the air. Many industrial facilities are situated along rivers or coastlines for easy shipping access, but this also puts them in the path of storm surges, which can exacerbate the release of toxic chemicals.

This issue is especially prevalent along the U.S. Gulf Coast, where petrochemical complexes and refineries face significant risks. In fact, a recent study cited by the Rice researchers found that hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico cause two to three times more pollution releases than normal weather conditions.

Inadequate Public Awareness

One of the key concerns raised in the report is the lack of public awareness surrounding the risks of toxic chemical releases during storms like Helene.

According to the report,

The statistics are disconcerting, yet they get little attention. That is because hazardous releases remain largely invisible due to limited disclosure requirements and scant public information. Even [emergency responders](#) often don't know exactly which hazardous chemicals they are facing in emergency situations.

Many states, including those in the Gulf region, suspend pollution restrictions during emergencies, leaving communities in the dark about potential chemical threats. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires large polluters to file risk management plans, but access to these documents is often restricted and heavily redacted due to concerns over terrorism.

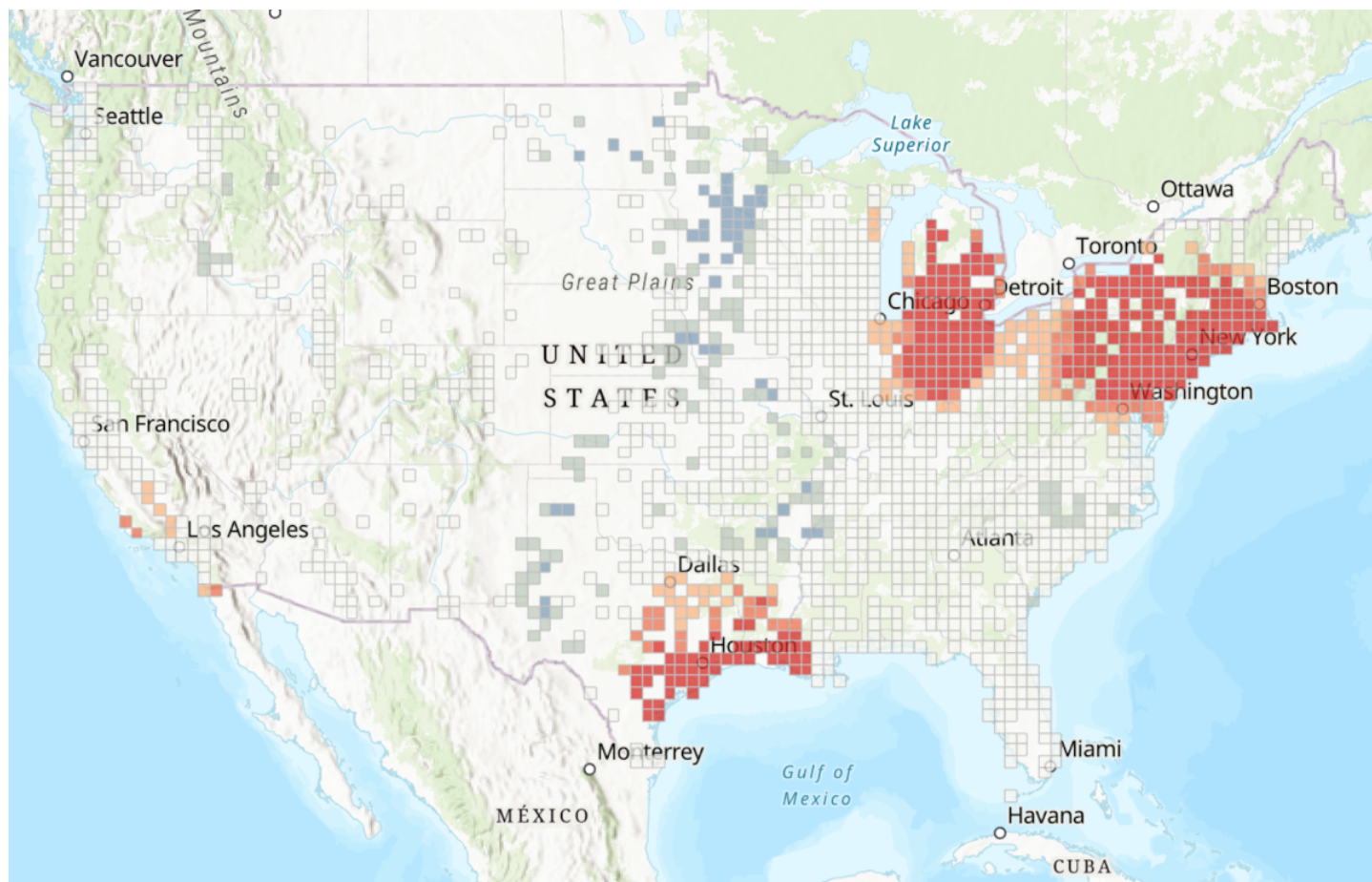
Real-time alerts from the National Response Center regarding chemical discharges often arrive with significant delays, sometimes over a week late, leaving both residents and first responders unaware of the full dangers they may be facing.

Mapping Vulnerable Areas

To help communities better understand their risks, the team at Rice University has developed an interactive map that identifies flood-prone industrial facilities across the country. Hot spots include the Gulf Coast, the Northeast, and the Great Lakes region, where clusters of major polluters face elevated flood risks.



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Water Contamination in North Carolina

The aftermath of Hurricane Helene has raised significant concerns about the safety of drinking water for residents relying on private wells in western North Carolina.

An estimated [3 million North Carolinians](#) rely on private wells for their water supply. The floods triggered by the storms have severely affected wells, and this is especially true in the hardest-hit areas. Rural regions, where reliance on private wells is far more common, have been impacted the most.

Thousands of wells are [reportedly](#) at risk of contamination. Harmful bacteria, such as E. coli, could be present in the water. This bacteria can cause severe gastrointestinal illnesses if consumed.

The state's Division of Public Health, along with local county health departments, has [issued guidelines](#) for well owners. For instance, authorities advise residents to obtain testing kits to ensure the safety of their well water. This is especially important for those living near potential contamination sources, such as industrial farms or chemical factories. Authorities urge residents to avoid turning on well pumps until the floodwaters have fully receded. Other advice includes boiling or chlorinating the water.

Conclusion

The risks from Hurricane Helene aftermath are undeniable, and some have seized this disaster as a pretext to push for more government regulations. The researchers from Rice University, along with local authorities, have pointed to chemical leaks and contaminated water as reasons for stricter controls on industrial sites and pollutants. However, their call for increased regulations misses the mark. The real issue isn't a lack of rules, but the chronic inefficiency of government agencies in managing environmental disasters. (Plus, constitutionally, this is not a proper role for the federal government.)

Time and again, the federal government has shown it lacks the ability to respond swiftly or effectively to



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crises like Helene. More regulations won't solve this problem. Instead, empowering *local* communities and businesses to take responsibility for their own disaster preparedness would be far more effective. By focusing on more red tape, the so-called experts ignore the failures already evident in government-run disaster responses, exposing communities to ongoing threats while bogging down industry with questionable regulations.

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