

Hurricane Harvey made landfall in the U.S. on August 25, 2017. That probably seems like ancient history to many Americans who live outside the area. The storm has certainly dropped out of the national media. It's not easy to find information about how storm recovery is proceeding. But here's where I could find.

Let's start by recalling the storm's impact. Before it was over, Harvey had caused at least 68 deaths and \$152 billion dollars in damage in the United States. Some parts of Houston received over 50 inches of rain, more than its average yearly rainfall, in a few short days. The hurricane [caused](#) major damage or destruction to 40,000 homes. Much of the area flooded was outside even the 500-year floodplain.

As of mid-January, there [were](#) 47,000 flood insurance claims, and almost \$3 billion had been paid out. The number may have doubled by now. Recovery seems to be [slowest](#) in smaller coastal towns that were hit the most heavily and people feel as if they've been forgotten.

There were [major leaks](#) of toxic substances that were not reported until much later. But it was hard to ignore what [happened](#) at the Arkema chemical plant, where there was not only an explosion but fires that burned for most of a week. First responders and neighbors have filed lawsuits seeking damages. The company had provided only a paragraph-worth of instructions to its own employees on how to respond to floods (and only up to three feet of water), providing even less in the way of useful planning information to the public. In the meantime, Scott Pruitt has imposed a two-year delay on an EPA chemical safety rule, presumably to give himself time to repeal it altogether.

What about preparing for future disasters? Harris County [amended](#) its building code to require that all new buildings in the 500-year floodplain be elevated two feet, but the code does not apply within municipalities. Houston's mayor [proposed](#) a similar change in late January, and the city council approved it in early April. There's [talk](#) about improving reservoirs, but that will be a lengthy and expensive undertaking. When Harvey hit, there were [already](#) 3000 homes on the county's buyout list, and the county was averaging about 150 buyouts a year. In the aftermath of Harvey, the state government [called](#) for \$61 billion in flood control spending, but two-thirds is for infrastructure and only a third for buyout and elevation projects.

Houston is built on a model of fast, cheap growth made possible by weak land use planning. The city, which is only fifty feet above sea level, has had [three](#) 500-year floods in three years. I wrote in an earlier [post](#) of the city's "shockingly poor" flood

control system, which is designed to allow some flooding even from much smaller storms. Climate change may have [contributed](#) to the intense rainfall, and the greater amount of moisture in the air from warmer seas will only intensify in the future. Texas seems to be determined to do little about this problem, leaving it to the federal government to pick up the tab for Texas flood risks through infrastructure spending and subsidized flood insurance. You have to wonder whether that's a sustainable long-term policy.