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THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE

After Harvey, EPA Administrator Vows Bold Response To Polluted Sites Around Houston

Kevin Diaz
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<http://www.chron.com/news/politics/article/After-Harvey-EPA-administrator-vows-bold-12218929.php>

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt, who has visited Texas twice since Hurricane Harvey, vowed Thursday to have "an answer" by next month for a permanent solution to clean up the San Jacinto River Waste Pits.

"What was concerning about that site in advance of the storm, and is a concern today, frankly, and that is that the response, the capping that's taken place, this agency's had to work through remediation efforts every year since 2011," he said in a Chronicle interview. "So there's not been a permanent solution that's really been applied there that provides confidence to the citizens in advance of these kinds of storms."

The EPA Superfund site has been packed with dioxins and other toxic substances from a local paper mill for the past four decades.

"What's needed at San Jacinto is an answer," he said. "What's needed is a permanent solution...and as I indicated on the site, that is coming... We're going to provide an answer to that site that is going to provide permanency."

One option under consideration, he said, is excavating and removing material around the polluted site, rather than capping it. "The alternative (to capping)," he said, "is excavation."

In the wake of the chemical explosion at the Arkema Inc. plant in Crosby, Pruitt said the EPA has given the company another 30 days to provide information about its risk management plan and the steps it took when the site flooded and its employees were forced to evacuate, leaving behind volatile toxic chemicals that ignited due to lack of power and refrigeration.

The company, in an initial response filed last week, sought a 90-day extension, Pruitt said.

The issue has raised questions about proposed changes to industrial risk management plans, which remain under review.

"There have been questions about risk management plans having too much information that would actually empower and equip terrorists to come in and hit soft targets," Pruitt said. "So there's a balance there."

In a wide-ranging interview, Pruitt also dismissed concerns about the potential closure of the EPA lab in Houston, part of a region that just saw a dozen Superfund sites flood.

Pruitt said the potential closure is part of a nation-wide organization review begun under the Obama administration, and that no decision has been made.

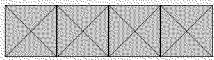
"I would not look at that as a decision that's final," he said. "That's a decision that's under review. Once we get better information through this process we'll be able to make a more complete decision about where regional labs should be located and how they serve the states..."

"This is still under review, and very well could stay in Houston," he added.

"The overriding principle is we will have a presence, it will be a meaningful presence, it will be a partnership, and it will achieve the outcomes that are important in these areas."

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