
Burying our head in sand on climate change no longer an option

By Victor B. Flatt and Rob Verchick | September 28, 2017

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Photo: Gregory Bull, STF

FILE - In this Thursday, Aug. 31, 2017, file photo, a flame burns at the Shell Deer Park oil refinery in Deer Park, Texas. Companies have reported that roughly two dozen storage tanks holding crude oil, gasoline and other fuels collapsed or otherwise failed during Harvey, spilling a combined 140,000 gallons of fuel, according to an Associated Press analysis of state and federal accident databases. Federal rules require companies to be prepared for spills, but don't require them to take any specific measures to secure the massive fuel storage tanks at refineries and oil production sites that are prone to float and break during floods. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull, File)

Every day during the Hurricane Harvey disaster, our hearts would sink as we kept hearing the word "unprecedented" again and again. Harvey wasn't supposed to strengthen so fast; it shouldn't have stalled where it did. Every day as we hoped the worst was over, Harvey would pummel us even harder.

Everything was outside the norm, breaking all records. Over 50 inches of rain. Houston's "wettest month in recorded history." High river marks exceeded by 10 feet. A total volume of rainwater four miles square and two miles tall. Millions of residents evacuated or sheltering in place in America's fourth-largest city. All of them afraid.

Just days later came Irma, the most powerful Atlantic hurricane on record, whose strength was matched only by its unpredictability. Who should evacuate and where? Then, in less than a week, Maria followed, destroying much of Puerto Rico's infrastructure.

The shock of these powerful and unprecedented events in such quick succession rattles even the strongest. How do we ready ourselves for "unprecedented"?

While these disasters are unprecedented in many ways, they are not beyond imagination and not immune to safer and smarter policies. And now that the storms have moved on and people are out of immediate danger, we need to have a national conversation about that.

We've both spent years studying and advocating for policies that keep people safer during disasters. One of us watched his New Orleans house stew for weeks in swamp water after Hurricane Katrina breached the city's faulty levees. And one of us watched the waters rise around him in Houston during Harvey as intense rain began to flood even a high-elevation, well-drained area.

Unprecedented weather is on a roll, enough so that we need to reconsider the assumptions that underlie our pre-storm planning. Houston has now had 500-year storms - storms with a 0.2 percent chance of occurring in a given year - in each of the last three years. In addition, a draft section of the upcoming U.S. National Climate Assessment - leaked to the press but not yet released by the Trump

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administration - documents a 40 percent increase in "heavy precipitation" events in Texas since 1901 and projects an increase in hurricane intensity and the number of "very intense" hurricanes as average temperatures climb. Whatever one thinks of the causes of climate change, it's clear the historical record is no longer an accurate way of projecting future conditions. We've got a new "normal" on our hands.

How should we prepare?

To begin, we should stop making things worse. In addition to the Trump Administration's well-publicized efforts to roll back limits on carbon pollution, it has also axed important initiatives, including the Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience, that helped cities, states and tribes prepare for larger floods, prolonged droughts, and stronger wildfires. The president also revoked Obama-era standards that required the federal government to account for sea-level rise and other climate change impacts when building new infrastructure.

Most recently, the Trump administration stalled the release of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Resilience Toolkit because of the mere mention of climate change. This toolkit, which teaches communities how to rebuild in safe and cost-effective ways, is sorely needed as we undertake recovery from these disasters.

Similar foolishness is at work at the state level, too. In North Carolina, unprecedented river flooding killed 22 people last year. That was after the state government simply stopped enforcing a law that required agencies like the North Carolina Emergency Management Service to update its climate models. Perhaps with up-to-date information, more evacuations would have been ordered and lives saved.



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We should be proud that the emergency responses in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico were so much improved over the disastrous Katrina response. And we urge Congress to support recovery efforts in those places with generosity and speed. But government also has a role to play on the front end. That means managing development and funding infrastructure with the conditions of the future in mind.

This cannot be done without the federal government doing an about-face on climate change. President Trump must reinstate the programs and policies that help communities learn about climate change impacts and prepare for them. And his party must drop the pretense that the reality of climate change is somehow in doubt. With the right leadership and scientific information, America can surely protect itself from unprecedented storms. It's the unprecedented ignorance we worry about.

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