

With Port Neches burning, do we really think gutting the EPA is wise?

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Two Texas tragedies provide fitting bookends for the fate of a regulation that the Environmental Protection Agency issued to protect first-responders and the neighbors of companies that manufacture and store highly hazardous chemicals.

In April 2013, an explosion at a fertilizer blending and distribution plant in West, Texas, killed 15 people, hospitalized 260 others, and destroyed or damaged 150 nearby buildings, including two schools and a nursing home.

Then, last week, a series of explosions at the TCP chemical plant in Port Neches injured three workers and forced the evacuation of thousands of the town's residents on the day before Thanksgiving.

When I was growing up in Port Neches in the 1960s, the air that I breathed riding my bike to the junior high school two blocks downwind from the TCP plant (then called Neches Butane) was sometimes so putrid that I hurried to get indoors. Across the city park from our home, the Neches River was so polluted that the only fish that could survive were alligator gar, a Jurassic-era species that can breathe air when the water is too polluted.

Today, the air around Port Neches is much cleaner (though by no means perfect), and the river supports a variety of fish. The dramatic change came about because the many petrochemical plants in the area had to comply with regulations written by the EPA under laws that Congress passed in the early 1970s and implemented by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

One of those laws called on the EPA to write regulations requiring the facilities that keep large enough quantities of extremely hazardous substances like [butadiene](#) to implement "risk management plans" to reduce the likelihood of catastrophic releases of chemicals into the neighboring air.

After the West explosion, President Obama ordered EPA to issue stronger regulations to improve safety and security at those facilities. EPA published the promised regulations in January 2017.

It is too soon to tell whether the TPC plant was in compliance with the Obama administration regulations. We do know that EPA records show it has been out of compliance with its permit requirements in [12 of the last 36 quarters](#) and that it released more than 61,000 pounds of butadiene, a known human carcinogen, [in 2017 and again in 2018](#). The latest explosion probably

released a lot more butadiene than that, along with other toxic chemicals and combustion byproducts.

Ironically, the Trump administration gutted the Obama administration regulations a week before the explosion as part of its ongoing effort to roll back regulations that businesses like Houston-based TPC don't like.

Other rules that the Trump administration has withdrawn or gutted include EPA's Clean Power Plan to reduce greenhouse gases from power plants, the Department of Transportation's regulation requiring "high hazard" trains hauling 70 or more cars filled with oil or ethanol to install better brakes, and the Department of Interior's blowout prevention rules aimed at preventing another Deepwater Horizon disaster. The list goes on and on.

It is a good idea to revisit rules periodically to see if they are still working as they should, and all of the recent presidential administrations have undertaken such "lookbacks." But the Trump administration's wholesale assault on regulations designed to protect neighbors, workers and the environment is unprecedented and dangerous.

Following the Port Neches explosion, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's executive director noted that we "have witnessed an unacceptable trend of significant incidents impacting the Gulf Coast region" in recent years. If we want to reverse that trend, we need to be making regulations more protective, not gutting them.

As the 2020 elections approach, many issues will be on the agenda. The fate of the regulatory programs that protect us from irresponsible companies should be high on the list.

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<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/outlook/article/With-Port-Neches-burning-do-we-really-think-14870909.php>