

CLIMATE JUSTICE IN THE WAKE OF THE 2017 ATLANTIC HURRICANE SEASON

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The recent damage caused by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose, and Maria has been disastrous and the true extent of the destruction is only just beginning to be uncovered. According to a report by Moody's Analytics, Hurricanes Harvey and Irma may have cost the U.S. between \$150 and \$200 billion while Jose and Maria may have caused between \$45 and \$90 billion worth of damage to Puerto Rico. The series of hurricanes, which raged consecutively from early August until late September, was generated during the peak of the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane season and has led to it being one of the most active hurricane seasons on record. According to a report by the National Hurricane Center (NHC), a body of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), September 2017 was the most active month ever recorded in terms of Accumulated Cyclone Energy (ACE), which measures the combined strength and duration of tropical storms and hurricanes.

While the storms affected large portions of the Eastern Seaboard, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean islands, the areas in both the United States and in the Caribbean that were most impacted by the series of hurricanes were low-income communities. Following natural disasters, low-income communities are often the most afflicted areas and take the longest to recover. In addition to lacking the level of disaster related infrastructure that wealthier areas have, low-income communities contain a disproportionately high number of Superfund sites when compared to wealthier communities. According to a report by the Center for Biological Diversity, the majority of flooded Superfund sites in Texas are in low-income neighborhoods or communities of color. Of the 82 Superfund sites affected by Harvey-related flooding, 60, or 73%, are located in low-income communities.

This same pattern of environmental injustice can be seen throughout the Caribbean. Numerous islands, including Puerto Rico, Dominica, Barbuda, the US Virgin Islands, and the Dominican Republic were nearly completely devastated by extraordinarily high winds and record-setting levels of rainfall. The intensity and frequency of these storms has devastated local infrastructure, rendered hundreds of thousands of people homeless, and has complicated relief efforts immensely. According to Ronald Sanders, the ambassador for Antigua and Barbuda, 95% of the structures on the island were destroyed and, for the first time in 300 years, there is no longer a single person inhabiting the island. Refugees from the storm are currently residing in Antigua; however, the small island nation has neither the funds nor the infrastructure to support the 1,800 refugees indefinitely.

In addition to near-total destruction, many of these small island nations face uncertain and indefinitely long recovery processes due to lack of economic means and infrastructure. Furthermore, environmental hazards due to the storms are just beginning to be uncovered and, similarly to Texas, are concentrated more heavily in low-income areas than in wealthier neighborhoods. According to the EPA's Superfund National Priorities List, there are 23 Superfund sites located in Puerto Rico. While, thankfully, EPA assessments have not found any significant damage to these sites due to Hurricane Maria, the dense concentration of Superfund sites, coupled with the fact that nearly 44% of the population lives at or below the poverty line, is an environmental crisis waiting to happen. Environmental justice is becoming an increasingly more pressing issue as low-income communities are hit the hardest by natural disasters such as the recent hurricanes, leading to the creation of climate refugees and countless more social justice issues.

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The California Environmental Lawyers at Bick Law LLP will continue to monitor the tragic effects of natural disasters and the resulting environmental impacts.