

# Galveston Bio-Lab Declared Safe

**Exclusive:** Flooding from Hurricane Harvey triggered a dangerous chemical explosion outside Houston, but a bio-lab in Galveston bristled over concerns about the potential release of its dangerous pathogens, reports Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

The Galveston National Laboratory in Texas, which contains samples of some of the most deadly and incurable diseases, has issued a statement reporting itself safe five days after Hurricane Harvey struck on Friday amid safety concerns for a lab built in one of America's most active hurricane zones.

The lab issued a statement late on Wednesday saying, "The GNL reported that the facility continued operations without interruption and did not incur any damage, loss of power or biocontainment during the storm. "

Until Wednesday, there had been a news blackout about the lab since the Category 4 hurricane struck the island of Galveston in the Gulf of Mexico, where the lab is located. Reporters had been unable to reach the island because of severe flooding and the local press did not report on the fate of the lab. A voice message I left at the lab on Tuesday was never returned.

The lack of news about the lab fueled legitimate worry about its condition, given longstanding concerns about placing the lab in the path of hurricanes.

On its website, the lab says it has been constructed to withstand a Category 5 storm. But when it was built in 2008, local environmentalists raised the alarm. Hurricane Ike, weaker than Harvey, hit Galveston in 2005 and had knocked out back-up generators at the University of Texas Medical Branch, where the lab is located.

"The University of Texas should consider locating its biohazards lab away from Galveston Island and out of harm's way," Ken Kramer, director of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club, told *The New York Times* a month before the lab opened in November 2008. "As destructive as it was, Hurricane Ike was only a Category 2 storm. A more powerful storm would pose an even greater threat of a biohazards release," Kramer said. Hurricane Harvey was a Category 4 storm when it made landfall on Friday night.

"It's crazy, in my mind," Jim Blackburn, an environmental lawyer in Houston, told the *Times*. "I just find an amazing willingness among the people on the Texas coast to accept risks that a lot of people in the country would not accept."

Those fears were raised again this week in the absence of news about the lab. Professor Francis Boyle, who drafted the Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989, the U.S. domestic implementing legislation for the Biological Weapons Convention, said he feared for the lab's safety.

"As I see it the existential problem is this: What happens if and when the fuel for the back-up generators runs out?" asked the expert in biological weapons. "The negative air pressure that keeps (the) bugs in there ends. And (the) bugs can then escape."

The \$174 million lab, built with federal funds, says on its site that it maintains "impeccable, explicit, and transparent safety standards at all levels of biological containment, consistent with federal laws and guidelines."

But a 2014 article in *The Houston Chronicle* reported that no such federal guidelines exist. "The U.S. Government Accountability Office ... released a study that repeated its findings last year that there is still no government agency responsible for overseeing the safety of some 400 laboratories nationwide authorized to handle hazardous biological material," the *Chronicle* reported. "The study also found that such laboratories are built without regard for need or assessment of risk and that no national standards exist for their construction and operations."

### **Legitimate Concerns**

Amid the silence from Galveston I accurately reported these legitimate concerns about the lab in an [article](#) for *Consortiumnews.com* that appeared on Wednesday. Given what was known when it was written, it was balanced, with much space given to what the lab says were its precautions in the case of a hurricane. It also pointed out past concerns with the lab and detailed other cases where hurricanes had damaged laboratories.

I also posted the article directly onto *The Huffington Post* website and sold a shorter version of it to Independent Newspapers of South Africa, publishers of more than 20 dailies, including the *Johannesburg Star*, *Cape Argus* and the *Pretoria News*, all of which published the piece.

The belated statement about the safety of the lab was released only after the University of Texas Medical Branch, where the lab is located, reacted to the story on *The Huffington Post*.

"There are inaccurate reports that the Galveston National Laboratory (GNL) at The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston may have been compromised because of Hurricane Harvey," the full statement said. "These false reports do a disservice to all of the people in our community and the dedicated scientists

and workers on staff at the GNL. The GNL reported that the facility continued operations without interruption and did not incur any damage, loss of power or biocontainment during the storm. At no time was there cause of concern for the safety and security of GNL personnel, the research or the community.”

### **Lab Violates its Procedures**

My article did not say the lab “may have been compromised” but only that it “could” be. By delaying this statement for five days there was indeed legitimate cause for concern. In addition, the statement says, “The GNL reported that the facility continued operations without interruption...”

But the lab’s website says “plans are in place to shut down and secure all laboratory operations if a hurricane landfall is predicted near Galveston.” It says that “this shut-down and decontamination can be done quickly, with all work in the facility ceasing, the lab locked down, and all infectious agents and biological and chemical material placed into safe and secure storage.”

The 2008 article in the *Times* about the laboratory said, “Each time a hurricane approaches the island, scientists will have to stop their experiments and exterminate many of the viruses and bacteria they are studying.”

The lab’s statement admits then that it may have violated its own procedures in preparing for a hurricane, acknowledging that “the facility continued operations without interruption.”

In a separate statement, the director of the lab, James LeDuc said his staff had been monitoring the storm for “two weeks”, though it was only declared a hurricane the day before it made landfall.

“We have been tracking this storm for the better part of two weeks and stopping work in preparation for it,” LeDuc said. It’s not clear when the work was stopped, what work it was, or for how long. This would appear to contradict the lab’s statement that work was “uninterrupted.” A spokesman for the lab did not respond to an email seeking clarification.

Serious questions are raised if the lab ignored its own procedures and then did not issue a statement for five days. The lab came through the storm, according to its own statement, but the staff could not have foreseen how bad the storm would be.

Raul Reyes, director of media relations at the University of Texas Medical Branch, wrote me in an email that it was “disingenuous” of me to base my report “on the basis of one unreturned call.” But this was “disingenuous,” I responded, since Reyes knew I rested my report on longstanding concerns about the lab. I

suggested to him that the lab had let the nation down by failing to issue a statement for five days after the storm hit.

### **Twitter Attack**

A reporter from the local *Galveston Daily News*, John Wayne Ferguson, then launched a broadside against me on Twitter. He demanded that I print a correction. When I asked him what was factually wrong with my piece that needed correcting, he did not respond. When I asked him why the *News* did not write a story about the lab, he likewise did not respond. When I told him it was responsible reporting to raise these concerns, he responded: "Bullshit."

It was instructive about how establishment media, large and small, have lost their skepticism and adversarial role against those in authority. The existence of the laboratory in their town, and the longstanding, genuine concerns about it, should have been a focal point of the newspapers' coverage of the hurricane even if only to report on how well the safety procedures had been implemented. It seems clear the local newspaper did not take seriously any of the concerns about this lab and where it is located, with Ferguson even ridiculing those concerns.

A reporter from the *Columbus Dispatch*, Marty Schladen, then joined the fray on Twitter, asking me sarcastically, "What are they supposed to write? All's well at the lab?"

"Yes," I replied. "It is one of the first stories they should have looked into and written when Harvey hit to allay national and local concerns."

A second reporter at the *News*, Marissa Barnett, initially accused me of "sensationalism" and "fear-mongering." But when I explained that given the concerns of building such a lab in a hurricane zone the *News* had been irresponsible not to have covered the lab, she acknowledged those concerns and said the paper should have written a "brief." I think it called for a major story in the local paper to look into how the lab was dealing with the storm.

Joshua Frank, the managing editor of *CounterPunch*, was the only one who seemed to get it. He wrote: "As far as I'm concerned, it's a story that should've been covered by local media. The University should have said it was safe to begin with."

The only story the *News* eventually wrote about the lab was by Ferguson, attacking me for reporting a "rumor" and quoting the director, LeDuc, as though it had been a couple of sunny days in Galveston. "There was not a whole lot going on to begin with," he said. Even in this article the *News* did not take the opportunity to question LeDuc in detail about what precautions, if any, the lab

had taken.

## Pressure

The lab is something of a cash cow for Galveston, about which the community appears to be defensive. When its construction was announced in 2003 as a bio-defense laboratory in the wake of 9/11, it was said that it would provide at least 200 jobs and pump \$75 million a year into the island's economy.

"Bo" Quiroga, then mayor of Galveston, told the *Chronicle*, "I think that probably, if you take a look at some of the cities in the running for this, there was nowhere else that had stronger community support."

During the day Tuesday an editor from the *Huffington Post* informed me by email that my story was being retracted because LeDuc had stated that the lab was secure. I responded that the story should not be pulled because it was accurate regarding the concerns. It did not say that microbes had escaped. By retracting the story, the *Huffington Post* fed the misguided impression that the story was wrong. I argued to no avail that what was needed was a follow-up to update the story with the belated statement that the lab was unharmed.

On Wednesday, *Esquire*, which had linked to my article in a story about environmental hazards in Texas during the storm, caved to pressure from Ferguson and the lab that there was nothing to be concerned about and published a clarification.

Earlier in the day I received an email from editors at Independent Newspapers in South Africa. They had received a complaint from Christopher Smith Gonzalez from the university's communications office. He falsely said that my story was "not correct" because, "There was no breach of any sort during the storm."

An editor wrote me, "we never said there was a breach, but only fears of a breach." He refused to retract the story and asked for a follow-up piece, which is what you've also been reading here.

**Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist. He has written for the Boston Globe, the Sunday Times of London and the Wall Street Journal among other newspapers. He is the author of "How I Lost By Hillary Clinton" published by OR Books. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at @unjoe.**

---