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PUBLISHED: AUG 28, 2017

Houston-area Courts Crippled by Hurricane Harvey



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Houston, Aug. 27.

Pummeled by Hurricane Harvey, federal and state courts along the Texas Gulf Coast have closed their doors and suspended all operations, grinding to a near halt one of the busiest jurisdictions in the country.

The Texas Supreme Court and the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals on Monday issued an emergency order to allow the courts affected by the disaster to suspend regular court procedures and deadlines. The order is effective for one month.

Harris County's local and state courthouses are already closed through the week. State intermediate appellate courts in Houston—the 1st Court of Appeals and 14th Court of Appeals—are also shuttered.

Monday's order said that the storm's closure of courts and clerks offices and the difficulties it imposes on lawyers and parties will affect court proceedings. All courts in Texas must view any disaster-caused delay as good cause to modify deadlines and procedures in any case, civil or criminal.

The storm didn't spare federal courts. U.S. District Courts based Galveston and Victoria will remain closed all week, while federal courts in Houston, Corpus Christi, Beaumont and Lufkin planned to shutter Monday and Tuesday.

The effects of the closures are expected to be far-reaching. U.S. District Courts in the Texas Southern District handled about 14,100 filings for the 12-month period ended June 30, according to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. By comparison, New York's Southern District handled about 12,526 filings for the same period.

Judge Lee Rosenthal, chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas in Houston, and Judge Ron Clark, chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas in Beaumont, each didn't return a call seeking comment by deadline.

At the state level, the repercussions could also be widespread, especially if Harvey continues to drench the area and they can't reopen soon, said David Slayton, administrative director of the Texas Office of Court Administration.

"They handle a significant majority of litigation in the state, so to the degree they go down for a significant period of time, that will be a difficult task for us to resolve. Even accepting filings—they handle a majority of electronic filings. To the degree they are down for some extended period or their courthouse is inaccessible, that's a big challenge for us," Slayton said. He added that lawyers need to pay careful attention to Monday's emergency order.

"There could be impacts on lawyers in terms of filing deadlines and where court is being held," he said.

Although many courthouses in the area are closed, Slayton said all of the judges themselves, as far as he knew, remained safe during the devastating storm.

The hardest-hit courts were in Rockport, where the Category 4 hurricane made landfall on Friday night. Slayton said the courthouses there in Aransas County are not usable and have no electricity. They're expected to remain closed for four weeks, Slayton said. He said that adjacent San Patricio County has already offered the Rockport-based Port Aransas County courts a space to conduct court business.

On Monday, the remnants of Hurricane Harvey, which drifted inland and centered on San Antonio, began turning around and heading back to the Gulf Coast. Weather forecasters predict that the storm will go to Houston, which is already badly flooded from as much as 22 inches of rain over the weekend. This could be the most devastating flood that Houston has ever seen.

Besides Harris and Aransas counties, Harvey also closed the county and state courts in these counties: Bastrop, Cameron, DeWitt, Galveston, Matagorda, Montgomery and Nueces. Texas intermediate appellate courts located in Corpus Christi and Beaumont are also down.

"We're learning more and more by the moment," Slayton said.

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