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NOAA Interactive Tool Features Community-Level Natural Disaster Risk Mapping

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (“NOAA”) recently released an update to its [Disaster and Risk Mapping Tool](#) that now allows users to assess natural disaster risks at the community level.

NOAA'S DISASTER AND RISK MAPPING TOOL NOW PROVIDES GRANULAR DETAIL ON NATURAL DISASTER RISK

The Disaster and Risk Mapping Tool (the “Disaster Risk Tool”) now enables local governments, community members, and companies to visualize and analyze their exposure and vulnerability to extreme weather and climate events by census tracts, which are small county subdivisions of about 4,000 residents. With this granular detail, the Disaster Risk Tool identifies communities with socioeconomic vulnerability and a high risk from natural disasters.

NOAA assesses risk based on the expected loss to a community from natural disasters, the “social vulnerability” of that community, and the community’s resilience to natural disasters.

The Disaster Risk Tool provides census-tract level risk assessments for the following weather and climate hazards, and compares these with data at the county, state, and national level:

- Drought Risk
- Flooding Risk
- Freeze Risk
- Severe Storm Risk
- Tropical Cyclone Risk
- Wildfire Risk
- Winter Storm Risk

[According to NOAA](#), and in keeping with the Biden Administration’s [focus on Environmental Justice](#), the Disaster Risk Tool also highlights locations



where extreme weather and climate events may cause disproportionate impacts on populations with “higher vulnerability and lower resilience” to disasters. In doing so, it uses the following socioeconomic factors, which are similar to those used by the Biden Administration’s Environmental Justice tools: the EPA’s [EJScreen](#) and the Council on Environmental Quality’s Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (“[CEJST](#)”):

- Below Poverty (% of Population)
- Income (Per Capita Income)
- No High School Diploma (% of Population)
- Age 65+ (% of Population)
- Age < 18 (% of Population)
- Disabled Population (% of Population)
- Single Parent Households (% of Population)
- Minority Population (% of Population)
- Limited English (% of Population)
- Mobile Homes (% of Homes)
- No Vehicle (% of Households)

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

NOAA’s Disaster Risk Tool, therefore, can be used by agencies, communities, project proponents, and companies in conjunction with EJScreen and CEJST to focus on predicted future risks associated with weather and climate disasters, including those from climate change and sea level rise. These tools enable companies to assess the risk of disaster-related incidents and prepare accordingly. While these tools are useful to companies across a wide range of industries, those with energy production facilities, refineries, chemical plants, factories, warehouses, and agricultural facilities in environmental justice communities particularly should take note.

For example, these tools may help companies assess the risk of extreme weather and climate events in their siting decisions for new facilities and the expansion of existing facilities. The tools also allow companies to understand the communities in which they operate or plan to operate, and the vulnerability of those communities to natural disasters. State and local governments may require companies to address disaster risks and community vulnerability when applying for permits to construct, expand, or operate their facilities, and these factors are likely to become increasingly important in environmental reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”), corporate due diligence, and agency enforcement decisions.

Critically, early extreme weather risk assessment can help companies assess their operations, prepare for an incident, and update their response plans as needed to mitigate an incident’s impact. Government agencies, including the Chemical Safety Board (“CSB”), have for years warned companies to assess risks associated with extreme weather and prepare for weather-related events.¹ Similarly, at CSB’s request, the Center for Chemical Process Safety (“CCPS”) produced a guidance document to aid the industry in its preparation for extreme events such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and other natural hazards.²



Thorough assessment and preparation, regardless of industry, can help mitigate the impact of an extreme weather event on a facility, the surrounding community, and the environment. They also help a company defend against government and private party claims in future litigation that the company failed to prepare adequately for a disaster despite publicly available information identifying a certain location’s risk for extreme weather and climate events.

Indeed, the availability of such information in NOAA’s weather and climate Disaster Risk Tool, in conjunction with information in the environmental justice screening tools, may increase community engagement and the risk of permit application challenges and disaster-related disputes and government enforcement actions, as communities, non-profits, and individuals can now easily assess their risk from weather and climate events and tie that risk to particular facilities.

Thus, companies would do well to study these tools and seek legal assistance in identifying and assessing weather and climate disaster risks in their operations, incident response planning, and business decisions, particularly in environmental justice communities. King & Spalding can assist companies through this process and help ensure that clients are in the best position to respond effectively to litigation and government enforcement action should they arise. Our attorneys are currently advising clients across several different industries on incident response, natural disaster, climate change, and environmental justice related lawsuits, regulatory compliance, and enforcement matters.

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¹ See, e.g., Chemical Safety Board, “2020 Hurricane Season: Guidance for Chemical Plants During Extreme Weather Events” (available at: https://www.csb.gov/assets/1/6/extreme_weather_-_final_w_links.pdf); see also Government Accountability Office, “Chemical Accident Prevention: EPA Should Ensure Regulated Facilities Consider Risks from Climate Change” (available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/qao-22-10494>).

² Center for Chemical Process Safety, “CCPS Monograph: Assessment of and planning for natural hazards” (available at: <https://www.aiche.org/sites/default/files/html/536181/NaturalDisaster-CCPSmonograph.html>).