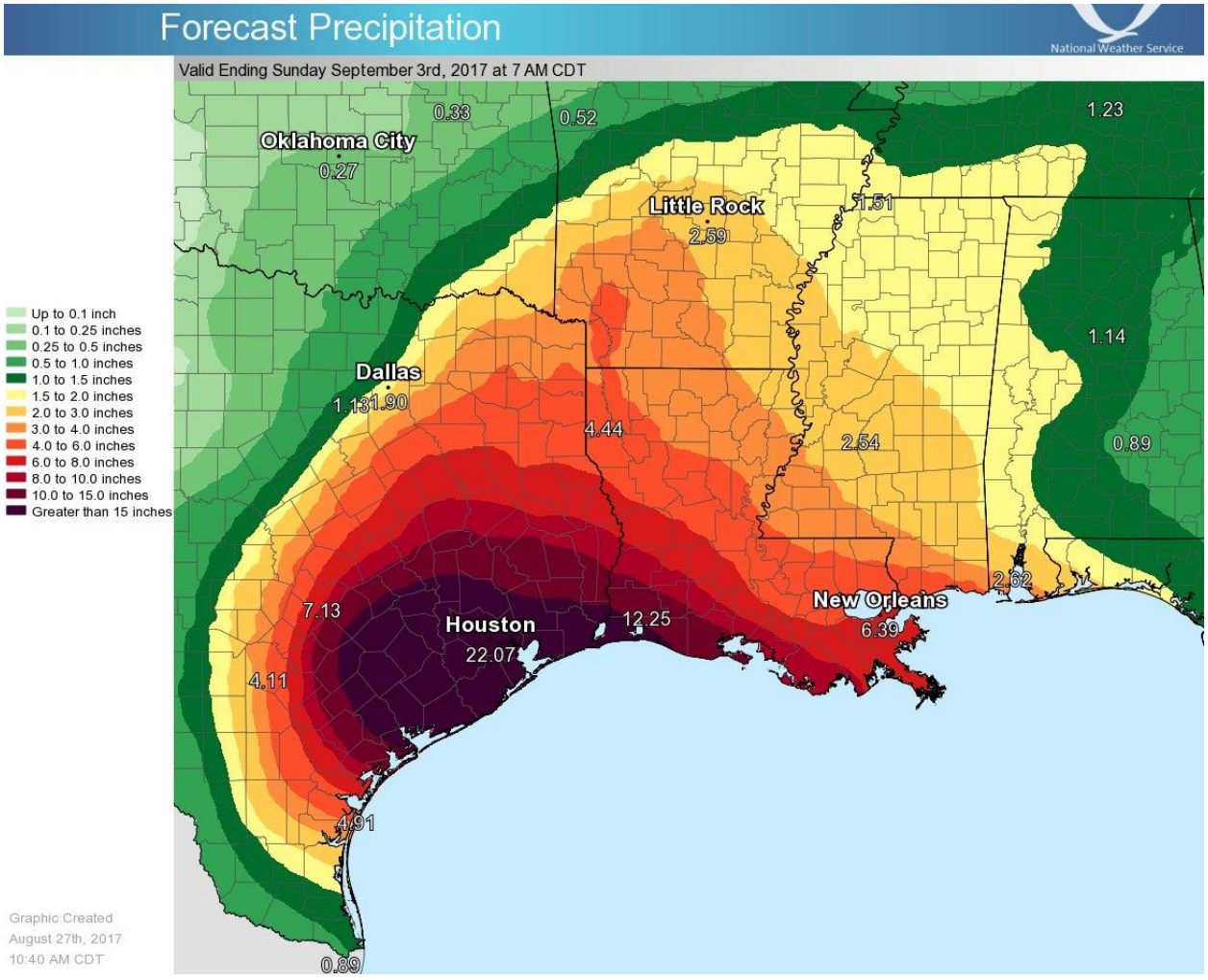
When Hurricanes and Stormwater Conferences Collide

Nine trillion gallons of water pummeled Houston just before the annual blockbuster stormwater conference, aptly named *StormCon,* came to Bellevue during summer's steamy close. Members of the Stormwater Strategic Initiative team attended the conference and noted the heightened attention this year to green stormwater infrastructure including wetlands, parks, open space, and the celebrated tools of low impact development: rain gardens, bioretention and green roofs, along with their more muscular counterparts like permeable pavement.

Houston, the 4th largest city in the United States, had paved over and encased the sprawling city to such a magnificent degree that it had lost its ability to be resilient against Harvey, its wetlands and prairies destroyed and replaced by parking lots, strip malls and suburban tracts.



(Courtesy of National Weather Service, NOAA, August 28, 2017)

By the time Harvey arrived at Texas's shores, outside detention ponds and traditional stormwater infrastructure was not enough, and could not infiltrate all that water. At the conference, the key note speakers, our own Mami Hara from Seattle Public Utilities and Dominque Lueckenoff, from EPA Region 3, posed an important question: Could stormwater practitioners be the key to a more resilient future? Could we build differently, restore the ability of rain and snow to seep slowly into the ground, creating beauty, recreation and art all at once?

The American Society of Civil Engineers issues a nationwide Infrastructure Report Card each year- the United States scores a depressing D overall and Washington State (2013 report) didn't do much better with a score of C. Curiously, the ASCE report card does NOT include stormwater so the 1,000 plus audience was queried and voted to score Washington on its stormwater capabilities using these scoring criteria: stormwater capacity, condition, future needs, public safety, funding, operations and maintenance (O&M), resilience and innovation. Similar to the rest of the U.S., the Washington results were not uplifting but the promising news is that innovation- the willingness to try new approaches—scored the highest.

(Creative Commons, National Guard)

Washington State has fairly rigorous stormwater regulations, including required low impact development use and a proliferating community of practice in this area, but stormwater is still a vexing problem here. If you turn stormwater on its head and look at a more positive frame, proper stormwater

management protects us from flooding, risk to property, livelihoods and life itself, and safeguards our historical reverence for, and connection with, clean streams, yummy and iconic salmon and the shellfish on our dinner plates.

Let's make stormwater practitioners solutioneers. The Stormwater Strategic Initiative Team is working with advisors and stakeholders to better target solutions which are embodied by projects on the ground and research (call Near Term Actions, or NTAs). This past year, the team approved funding for a nice range of green infrastructure projects that will restore the ability of polluted runoff to infiltrate, or soak, into the ground. The team is also working collaboratively on two implementation strategies; the Benthic Index of Biotic Integrity (bugs in streams) and Toxics in Fish. Stay tuned for more.

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