

A letter to the US Congress and Senate

Lessons of Hurricane Katrina on the protection of disaster responders

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Dear Members of Congress and Senate:

Thousands of disaster responders, workers, and volunteers in the Gulf Coast areas affected by Hurricane Katrina remain inadequately protected against exposure to environmental health hazards.

As individuals and organizations in the fields of public health and occupational and environmental health and safety, disaster response, recovery and cleanup, we are greatly concerned. Many of us have been directly involved in 9/11 rescue, response, and recovery efforts. In the wake of the terrible tragedy of Hurricane Katrina we urge that the lessons learned in 9/11 response efforts not be ignored in Katrina response operations.

As we came to recognize in the aftermath of 9/11, there is a difference between rescue and recovery. Now, however, a month after the storm, we are now well into the recovery stage on the Gulf Coast, and therefore EPA and OSHA should immediately commence enforcement of life-saving workplace and environmental laws and regulations.

Failure to do so puts countless workers and residents at risk of contracting preventable environmental and occupational diseases. This was our experience in the aftermath of 9/11, when thousands of workers and residents were unnecessarily exposed to toxic substances after being assured by EPA that the air was safe to breathe. At the same time, workers were left unprotected by OSHA, which declined to enforce its respiratory protection standard and other regulations. The illnesses of thousands of New York workers and residents today are in part the result of the failure of government agencies to enforce environmental and occupational health regulations after 9/11.

Therefore, we are unalterably opposed to the legislative proposal of Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) to allow the Environmental Protection Agency to temporarily suspend or relax its rules.

Although it is not yet possible to characterize with certainty the toxic nature of the flood waters that

cover Louisiana and Mississippi, what is known is of great concern.

The flood waters have been contaminated by 6.7 million gallons of petroleum as a result of major spills from refineries and with another 1-2 million gallons of gasoline from gas stations and 300,000 flooded cars. There have been hundreds of smaller oil spills (396 as of Wednesday 9/14). The flood waters contain elevated levels of sewage, bacteria, lead, mercury, hexavalent chromium, arsenic, and pesticides. Some contaminants, such as benzene, are presumed to be present in such large quantities that the EPA has not considered it necessary to conduct sampling. The flood waters impacted 31 hazardous waste sites and 446 industrial facilities that reported handling highly dangerous chemicals before the storm. Thousands of damaged buildings are likely to be contaminated with mold and asbestos. Additionally, to our knowledge, no tests have been conducted for dioxin B which is known to be present at levels of concern in southwest Louisiana.

As the flood waters recede, contaminants that remain have the potential to become airborne when disturbed by natural causes (wind and other storms) or by cleanup activities, creating an even greater occupational and public health hazard.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency Joint Taskforce published on September 17, 2005 an initial Environmental Health Needs and Habitability Assessment. The report provides an outline of the threats to the health of the public and of the workers who will be involved in cleaning up the areas impacted by Katrina. These threats are serious and are unprecedented in scope.

The joint report provides a valuable overview. However, it offers no details concerning what needs to be done to protect workers and residents. That is why we believe that Congress should act on the following recommendations. We must not repeat the errors of 9/11 today in New Orleans. Response and recovery operations must proceed expeditiously, but the health and safety of those engaged in such efforts must be protected.

We urge immediate action on the following steps:

1. Presume Contamination Until Proven Otherwise: Given the wide range and toxic nature of contaminants to which workers, volunteers, and residents may be exposed, it is imperative that work areas be presumed to be contaminated and that appropriate precautionary measures be implemented until the work environment is demonstrated to be safe.

2. Implement the National Response Plan's Worker and Community Environmental Testing and Monitoring Provisions: The worker and community environmental testing and monitoring provisions of the National Response Plan must be followed closely. It provides for hazard identification, environmental sampling, personal exposure monitoring, collecting and managing exposure data, development of site-specific safety plans, immunization and prophylaxis, and medical surveillance, medical monitoring and psychological support.

3. Enforce all OSHA and EPA Regulations: Environmental and occupational health standards must be strictly enforced. We are distressed that OSHA has defined its role in Katrina response, as in 9/11, as advisory rather than enforcement.

4. Assess the Hazards: EPA should conduct comprehensive environmental sampling to characterize the nature and extent of environmental hazards and NIOSH and OSHA must conduct a comprehensive assessment of the hazards post to recovery workers. Hazard assessment should include evaluation of environmental hazards presented by chemical plants and refineries, hazardous waste sites, in-place building materials, biological agents, and other potential sources affected by

the storm. Environmental monitoring should be ongoing. Sampling results should be accessible to the public in a timely manner. Toxic materials should be catalogued, evaluated and tested, and any known or potential releases contained. Failure to act will threaten returning residents and workers and will increase long-term cleanup costs as toxic substances spread to larger areas.

5. Train and Protect Clean Up Workers: All cleanup workers (public and private sector, paid and unpaid) should receive the appropriate OSHA-required training and equipment for protection against the hazards to which they may be exposed. OSHA should specify the minimum training that must be provided to workers engaged in clean-up and recovery. Training may include Hazard Communication, Respiratory Protection, Personal Protective Equipment, and Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response. Protective equipment may include respirators and protective clothing and equipment.

6. Provide Appropriate Decontamination for Workers: To protect worker and public health, emphasis must be placed on regular decontamination of workers and volunteers and of their protective gear, tools, equipment, and vehicles. Workers and volunteers must be trained in the importance of meticulous personal hygiene in the presence of toxics and must be provided with appropriate decontamination and sanitary facilities.

7. Provide Medical Surveillance: Provision must be made for early detection and treatment of occupational, environmental, and psychological illnesses. To ignore the medical needs of potentially exposed workers and residents is asking them to be guinea pigs in a long-term experiment the consequences of which remain unknown. All public and private sector rescue, response, and cleanup workers, including volunteers, should be entered into a centralized database to facilitate medical surveillance.

8. Protect Vulnerable Workers: Special consideration must be given to protection of immigrant and temporary workers, who reportedly are being recruited in large numbers. In 9/11 response efforts, immigrant and temporary workers were the workers least likely to be provided with proper training and respiratory protection, and were the workers least likely to have medical insurance. As a result, they incurred high rates of illness without having access to medical treatment.

9. Adopt Uniform Re-occupancy Standards: There must be one standard for re-occupancy that applies uniformly to all communities and is sensitive to the needs of vulnerable populations. EPA has indicated that it will permit local authorities to determine re-occupancy criteria. To allow each locality to implement its own standard for re-occupancy will result in a range of standards, not all of which may be adequately protective of public health.

A cleanup of this magnitude and complexity has never been undertaken. While we support proceeding with the cleanup and recovery with dispatch, protection of the health of clean-up workers and of the public at large must be given the highest priority.

P.S.

* From: <http://data.leanweb.org/news/ncosh.html>