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Speech

Statement of Kathleen Callahan Acting Deputy Regional Administrator U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Before the New York City Council Environmental Protection Committee

November 1, 2001

Good morning Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee. I welcome this opportunity to join my state and city colleagues in appearing before you to discuss the ongoing response by the federal Environmental Protection Agency to the tragic events of September 11. Joining me this morning is Peter Brandt, Chief for Intergovernmental Affairs and Berry Shore, our State and Local Government Contact.

On the morning of September 11, EPA responded immediately as events unfolded at the World Trade Center. Our Emergency Response Teams were on the scene that day in lower Manhattan, in Brooklyn, where the smoke plume was moving, and in New Jersey, assessing the possible public health and environmental impacts of the attacks.

Since September 11, EPA and other federal, state and city agencies have taken literally thousands of samples of dust, air, drinking water, stormwater runoff and river sediments in and around the World Trade Center site. We've also sampled at the Fresh Kills landfill, which has been receiving debris from the disaster site; in nearby neighborhoods and in New Jersey.

We've tested for the presence of pollutants such as asbestos, fine particulate matter, lead, volatile organic compounds, dioxin, benzene, metals, PCBs and other chemicals and substances that could pose a threat to the public and workers at the site. Fortunately, the vast majority of our tests find levels of these contaminants that pose no significant long-term health risks to residents, business employees and visitors beyond ground zero. And despite recent press accounts which suggest otherwise, these findings have not changed. In fact, environmental conditions off the site have improved in recent weeks.

While this news may be reassuring to the public, it is important to emphasize that the risks are different for the response workers at the World Trade Center site, who are working long hours in often very smokey and dusty conditions. That is why we have repeatedly said that workers at the site should wear respirators and other protective gear. EPA and other agencies have provided thousands of respirators and other gear to response workers at the site. We have set up washing stations at which workers can wash off and change into clean clothing before going home. Signs directing workers to wear protective gear are posted at our wash

stations.

I know that many lower Manhattan residents and employees of businesses in the area have felt the effects of the smoke still coming from fires at the site. The odors can be intense depending on the strength of the fires and the weather.

As you will hear later from various health officials, the particulate matter from the plume can be irritating to your eyes, nose and throat. It can cause more serious reactions in sensitive populations, such as people with respiratory problems or asthma, according to health officials, but does not cause any irreversible health affects.

I'm sure that many of you saw the *Daily News* headlines last Friday heralding a "Toxic Zone" at ground zero. While the data in the story were accurate, the interpretation of the data and the context was not.

The *Daily News* focused on a small number of sampling results with the highest contaminant readings. The paper failed to report, however, that EPA has taken thousands of samples that do not exceed federal standards or guidelines. In addition, the sampling results highlighted in the article are snapshots of the levels of certain chemicals associated with burning – such as benzene, dioxin and sulfur dioxide – at a moment in time. They were taken right on the debris pile, at ground level. Some were even taken using probes placed into the pile. EPA and Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards are set many times below the level at which you would expect health impacts. Our results tell us that these chemicals are present at ground zero at levels that sometimes exceed a federal standard. Again, taking the most protective approach – we continue to urge workers to wear their respirators.

People living and working in the area should take comfort in the fact that EPA air samples of pollutants such as benzene, dioxin and sulfur dioxide taken at the perimeter of the work site are either very low or non-detectable.

These pollutants are often found in the urban environment as a result of vehicle and factory emissions. With fires still burning at ground zero, is it not surprising that these levels are higher the closer one gets to the World Trade Center site. But, when the plume of smoke rises out of the site, it is quickly dispersed in the wind. Concentrations of any chemicals in the smoke are greatly reduced. Sensitive groups – those with asthma or other respiratory problems – have been advised to follow New York City Health Department advice to take special precautions.

Now I'd like to turn to some of our other findings. We have found asbestos in some of our air and dust samples at ground zero and the surrounding area. Some of the dust samples show levels above the one percent used to indicate that a material is asbestos-containing.

To date, out of more than 1300 air samples taken at about 20 fixed air monitoring stations in and around the site, only 30 have had levels of asbestos that exceed the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act or AHERA standard, we use to determine if children can re-enter a school building after asbestos has been removed or abated. It is a stringent and protective standard. With one exception on October 9, the last time we recorded a level above the school re-entry standard was September 30.

Keep in mind that the levels of asbestos we have found do not imply an

immediate health threat.

Asbestos exposure becomes a health concern when high concentrations of asbestos fibers are inhaled over a long period of time. Illness is very unlikely to result from a single, high-level exposure or from a short period of exposure to lower levels.

We do know that some people returning to area homes and businesses are finding dusty environments. If you find that your home or office has dust or debris from the collapse, you should follow the recommendations of the New York City Departments of Health and Environmental Protection on how to clean up properly.

Where we have found elevated levels of asbestos in lower Manhattan or where we have gotten reports of dusty conditions, EPA has been using our large HEPA vacuum trucks to pick up the dust. We've cleaned sidewalks, the promenade at Battery Park City, local playgrounds and parks and even children's sand boxes.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation has been monitoring for fine particulates – those smaller than 2.5 microns – at their existing network of monitoring stations. DEC & EPA have added three additional stations in lower Manhattan. To date, with a few exceptions, the levels of fine particulates have been below the level of concern for the general public, as well as groups more sensitive to air pollutants.

In addition to air and dust sampling, we also tested drinking water and water quality in the Hudson and East Rivers. All samples of drinking water, which were tested for a wide range of contaminants, had levels below federal standards. Analysis of runoff following heavy rain on September 14 did show some elevated levels of PCBs and other pollutants. Follow-up sampling on several occasions, however, found levels back to those normally found in area waters.

I know we will go into greater detail during the question and answer period, but I would like to touch on one additional topic. We are all committed to sharing the results of all of the data with the public and to helping people understand what they mean. All of the agencies share our data and use it to assess the risks to workers and the public and to develop approaches to any identified threats.

EPA has taken the lead in making the data available to the public through our website. Quite a bit of it is now up on our site – www.epa.gov – along with a daily summary of our findings. All of our data is available at a public information repository at our offices at 290 Broadway.

Response workers and the people of New York have been through much uncertainty and anxiety. We hope that our findings will help to allay concerns about their health and their environment. Be assured that we will be vigilant in our ongoing monitoring efforts.

In closing Mr Chairman, on behalf of all of us in the regional office of EPA, I would like to thank you for being a leader in environmental stewardship during your tenure as Chair of this Committee.

Thank you.

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