

Cleaning Dust Improperly Can Create New Hazards

NEW YORK—The air quality has improved, but some residents and employees near ground zero have another worry: that efforts to clean up from the World Trade Center disaster may be reintroducing contaminated dust into the air.

The fine powder that blanketed buildings near the disaster site contained unsafe concentrations of asbestos and less-dangerous amounts of heavy metals such as lead and mercury, some government and private tests show. Adding to residents' concerns at the high-rise at 15 Park Row, within two blocks of the disaster site, was their fear that the cleanup recontaminated their apartments. Residents there say they have seen crews cleaning exterior window ledges from within apartments, potentially allowing asbestos to blow inside.

Tenants say they complained in October to their landlord, J&D Apartments LLC, but got little response. They went on rent strike a month after the disaster, hired their own lawyer and commissioned environmental tests. Four of five samples of dust showed the presence of asbestos on window ledges and balconies, according to tests performed for the residents by Environmental Management Solutions of New York, a consulting firm. All of the asbestos levels exceeded federal safety standards for material containing asbestos, the tests showed.

J&D met earlier this month with ten-

ants, who say a company representative said there had been miscommunication and additional cleaning might be warranted. Officials with J&D didn't return telephone messages see ing comment.

The cleanup industry employs highly specific techniques to avoid exacerbating contamination problems. Although government agencies haven't mandated an across-the-board cleanup of downtown buildings, the city has warned landlords to at least mop or sponge dusty surfaces with specially treated water, use particle-trapping vacuums and replace filters on air-conditioning or heating systems.

To clean filters in heating units in apartments at 15 Park Row, workmen "would open the air filter, put it on the floor and vacuum it with a plain old dirty Hoover vacuum," instead of bagging and disposing of the contaminated filters, says Maria Gorecki, a 30-year-old attorney who moved into the building on Sept. 2. She says she recently left for an apartment uptown, partly because of discomfort about the way her former building was cleaned. J&D has sued Ms. Gorecki and some other tenants in a New York municipal court for breaking their leases and leaving.

The main cleanup effort—removing more than a million tons of debris from the disaster site itself—creates another danger that contaminated material will become airborne. To prevent dust from rising from the trucks hauling away the rubble, the city has told contrac-

tors to cover their cargo with tarps and wet it down twice: after loading it and before unloading it.

But some downtown residents complain the precautions aren't always followed. At least one test lends circumstantial support that this kind of failure may occur. Last month, the EPA found a reading above the federal safety threshold for airborne asbestos at a site near Stuyvesant High School, five blocks north of the disaster site. The elevated levels were brief, nowhere near the protracted exposure considered dangerous. The school stands close to a point where trucks bring ground zero debris to barges in the Hudson River that take it to a landfill in Staten Island. Residents such as Diane Lapson, whose apartment overlooks the barge operation, say they have observed workers on occasion failing to wet down the debris during unloading.

Matthew Monahan, a spokesman for the city's Department of Design and Construction, which supervises operations at ground zero, says it is possible that some dust rises during the transfer of debris from truck to barge. But, he says, "every effort is made to wet down the debris after it is taken from the World Trade Center site to minimize any dust." Paul Ashlin, a senior vice president at Bovis Lend Lease, one of the four main contractors working on the site, says, "If the residents have a real concern, I'll make a point of putting a further supervisor on that site."

—David Schwartz

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