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DAILY NEWS

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EPA's fog over lower Manhattan

Now that it's clear the government was foggy with the facts about the toxins at Ground Zero, the Bush administration must set the record straight. Washington also must pay for a thorough cleanup of the chemical residue in buildings downtown.

Sen. Hillary Clinton and other Democratic members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee have asked its chairman, Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), to hold hearings on the 9/11-related health hazards in lower Manhattan. Inhofe has refused, which is pure folly. This issue will not go away, and Republicans would be better off dealing with it now. They've already wasted two years.

Clinton said that if Inhofe won't hold the hearings, she will block a vote on President Bush's nominee to head the Environmental Protection Agency, Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt.

That should get the EPA's attention.

New Yorkers deserve to know the truth about the World Trade Center smoke and embers. The EPA swept toxic cinders under the rug and proclaimed that all was well. In fact, one week after the disaster, then-EPA chief Christie Whitman was already telling people the air was "safe to breathe."

Based on that unfounded claim, many rescue workers did not use respirators or masks. However, Whitman now contends that she did stress the use of masks. Additionally, people who live and work downtown returned to their ash-filled apartments and offices without knowing the truth.

Subsequent tests showed that the air and dust were full of toxins. In fact, a new report released last week by the University of California/Davis said the smoldering debris pile at Ground Zero was "a chemical factory" and the air was "brutal."

To make matters worse, the EPA inspector general said last month that the White House Council on Environmental Quality pushed the agency to issue reassuring statements and delete cautionary ones about the air quality downtown.

This month, city and federal health officials set up the World Trade Center Health Registry to track the physical condition of some 200,000 people who had been exposed to the smoke, dust and debris near Ground Zero. For example, how many have come down with ailments such as World Trade Center cough? Information on the program is available at (866) 692-9827 or online at www.wtcregistry.org.

It's a fine effort, but the federal government also must ensure that more people are not contaminated by the dust that remains in downtown buildings. Air vents, rugs, curtains, etc., that were not completely cleaned could still harbor dangerous pollutants.

The solution is obvious: Clean the buildings. Completely. And make Washington pick up the tab. It's the least the feds can do to compensate for their lies.