

The New York Times
10/6/2001

BATTERY PARK CITY

E.P.A. Says Air Is Safe, But Public Is Doubtful

By SUSAN SAULNY
and ANDREW C. REVKIN

The Environmental Protection Agency has tested the air in Lower Manhattan more than 1,000 times and has concluded that it does not show dangerous levels of contamination.

Sampler from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration indicate no airborne asbestos or other contaminants beyond the disaster site. And Joel A. Miele Sr., the city's commissioner of environmental protection, insists that while the air quality can cause nagging discomfort, "it's not a health concern."

But despite those assurances, many people who have moved back into downtown homes and offices are convinced that the air is unsafe, and they say they can produce their own data about the health risks: sore throats, tongue lesions, burning eyes and ears and skin rashes. They say they are afraid of what could be long-term health effects.

The intense fear of contaminated air has spread throughout downtown and taken on a life of its own, despite repeated assurances by the authorities, becoming one of the more unexpected and unmanageable side effects of the trade center disaster.

Over the past three weeks, the voices of disbelief have grown louder and angrier. On Wednesday night, at least 1,500 downtown residents packed a Wall Street hotel lobby, and with much shouting and even some

crying, vented their fears to a group of local officials who had come to calm them and answer questions.

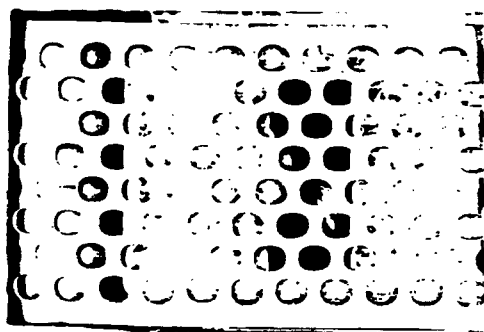
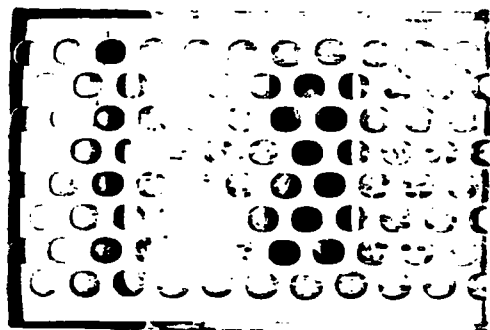
Many said their distrust comes directly from what they experienced and witnessed on Sept. 11. "The real issue is: how can two buildings disintegrate into thin air — given all the things in those buildings that were never meant to disappear into the air — and that air be perfectly safe to breathe?" asked Mary White, who lives in Battery Park City.

Government officials understand the fury as part of "human nature," Mr. Miele said, and point out that the real respiratory concern should be about something much more mundane: exhaust. New tests show that unfiltered diesel smoke coming from the rescue and construction vehicles now cramming the red zone is the potential new problem.

Nonetheless, residents want independent air testing and are pushing for the creation of a new city position, a nonpartisan "environmental advocate" who would explain how studies are being done and what the results mean.

"There's tremendous distrust of the information we're being given," continued Ms. White, who runs an online business from her home. "We feel physically sick when we stay there, sore throats, burning eyes, rashes."

The persistent doubts and fears of residents may actually be deeply rooted in human nature and evolution, and are apt to continue to out-



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Like many near the World Trade Center site, Nancy Graham, left, and Janet Heussner, wear surgical masks because they say the air smells.

P. 1 of 3

weigh any reassurances provided by health or environmental officials, experts on risk communication said.

"We're designed to react first based on whatever information we have at the time, which is mainly emotional and intuitive factors," said David P. Ropeik, the director of risk communication for the Center for Risk Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health.

But the one thing that may add the most to the confusion is the statistics themselves. Taken alone, without a full explanation from the authorities, the numbers sound frightening.

Officials have tested for asbestos, metals — lead, iron oxide, zinc oxide, copper, beryllium — and soot that might create health hazards, as well as other pollutants.

None of the metals exceeded OSHA limits. Tests have revealed occasional spikes in the levels of soot, which seem to be associated with the flare-ups of fires within the wreckage, state environmental officials said.

In all cases, the E.P.A. and OSHA, along with the city's Department of Health, indicated that there was no reason for general public concern. The agencies all note that there have been transient spikes in one pollutant or another, particularly near the epi-

center of the attacks, but no finding reveals a risk to public health.

Only 27 of 442 air samples exceeded E.P.A. safety levels for asbestos, but the mere mention of that substance causes alarm.

Since the first days after the attack, asbestos levels in dust in the red zone have almost all been below the concentration at which the mineral is even technically defined to exist — 1 percent of the total mass of a sample.

The exceptions to those findings have been made by the federal E.P.A. and the city's Department of Environmental Protection, which have noted on their Web sites certain days and places in the red zone where levels of asbestos in outdoor air exceeded safety standards. But those standards were set for air inside buildings, not the air outside, which disperses quickly.

So while the quality of the air may indeed be below certain safety standards, it is not dangerous, the agencies say. Asbestos risks increase when someone is exposed to it for a long period — often years — in a confined space. The chances of being affected now are minuscule, the authorities said.

The agencies said they chose to use the indoor standard to be cau-

tious and because a safety standard for outdoor air does not exist. Nowhere except near some mines has there ever been a problem with asbestos contamination outside a building, federal and city officials said.

But the mere fact that the level of asbestos does exceed a known threshold for safety has prompted the calls, e-mail messages and angry questions at meetings.

"You can see the dust, you can taste the dust, you can smell the smoke," said Mary Mears, a spokeswoman for the Environmental Protection Agency who rides the ferry from Jersey City each morning and walks through the red zone to her office on lower Broadway. "I can understand why people are not convinced based on the evidence they see. By the time I get to work I feel like I was licking the sidewalk."

She noted that no agency is saying that the air and dust are absolutely harmless. "We can't call it 100 percent safe," Ms. Mears said. "If you suffer from asthma, or even if you're just sensitive, the dust alone can irritate your lungs."

Peter M. Iwanowicz, the director of environmental health for the American Lung Association of New York State, said: "Everything I've seen so far has been consistent with

what the regulatory people are saying. Things are within legal standards and going down over time."

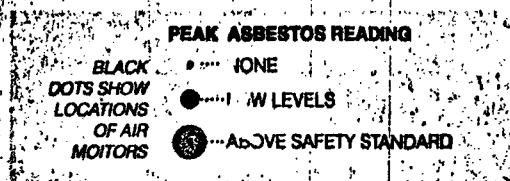
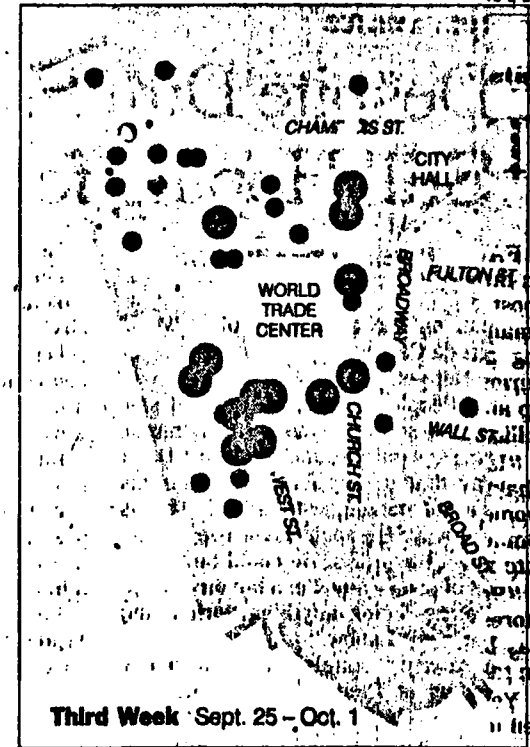
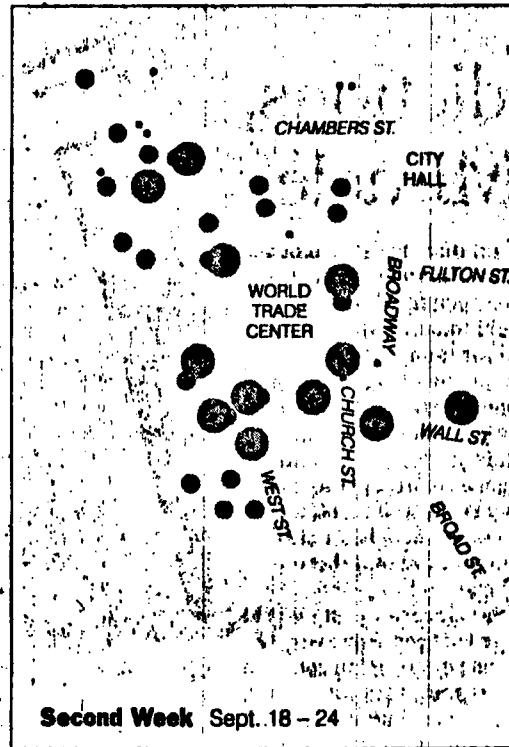
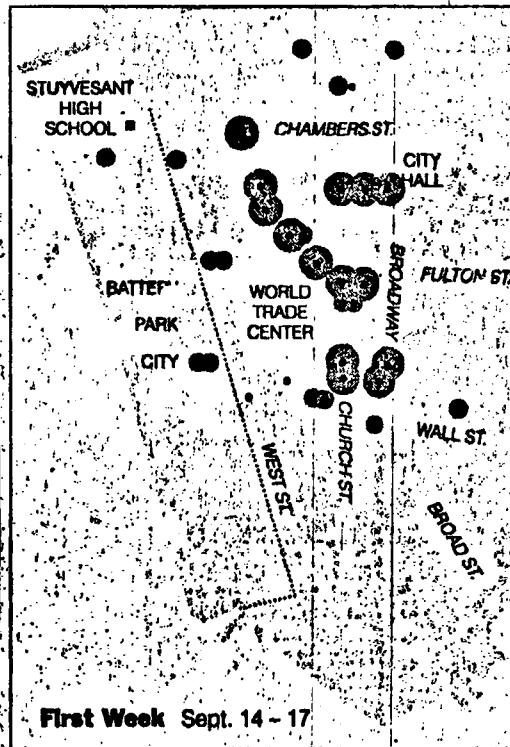
But downtown residents remain wary. At the Wednesday night meeting, many said they left the gathering more disturbed than when they arrived.

"I am mystified once again that I am walking out of a meeting with no more information than I came in with, and still unsure if I should be living in my apartment," said Donald Scherer, president of the Battery Park City Residents' Association.

"My wife is pregnant and we're scared as hell," he said.

The safety situation as improved substantially at the site itself, officials said. Dr. Thomas Matte, a medical epidemiologist for the National Centers for Environmental Health who was in New York City to watch for any health threats, said there was virtually no supervision at the attack site of the wreckage removal, with a lot of dust lofted into the air unnecessarily. That was unavoidable, with everyone focused on the search for survivors. Now, though officials are insisting that trucks be covered with tarps, the streets, wreckage and workers are washed down to cut dust.

P.2 of 3



Asbestos Readings in Lower Manhattan

Federal and city air monitors have detected levels of asbestos that exceed the allowable safety standards, but officials say that people would have to be exposed to these levels for many years before it became a health concern. The standard used here is an indoor standard, since no outdoor standard exists.

Sources: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; New York City Department of Environmental Protection

Andrew Phillips/The New York Times

P. 3 of 3