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EPA's on top of Ground Zero case

By CHRISTIE WHITMAN

Those of us in government and the media share an obligation to provide members of the public, in a responsible and calm manner, with the information they need to protect themselves and their families from any environmental hazards that may result from the attacks on the World Trade Center.

The Environmental Protection Agency has been working since Sept. 11 to make such information available in a complete and timely fashion.

It also is important that this information be put into context so information that may be unfamiliar by itself can be better understood. For example, a Friday Daily News article, "Toxic Zone," focused on a small number of sampling results with the highest contaminant readings, but it did not also report that EPA has taken thousands of samples that did not exceed federal standards or guidelines.

Absent that context, the public could understandably conclude that the situation at Ground Zero presents a major environmental health hazard to area residents and employees. That would be inaccurate, as your Saturday article "City, feds say WTC air's OK" made clear.

The situation with benzene illustrates

the nature of our monitoring and how we analyze the test results. Benzene is a pollutant that is being released from the disaster site as a result of ongoing fires, and EPA's primary goal is to determine whether the workers at Ground Zero are being exposed to unsafe levels. The data also give us an indication of the potential for benzene to migrate from the site at unsafe concentrations.

To identify the highest concentrations of benzene, EPA places extended probes in the debris pile where a smoke plume is sighted. These are the areas where we find the higher readings highlighted in The News' Friday article.

EPA has consistently said elevated levels of benzene and other contaminants at Ground Zero are a concern. This is why from the beginning we've strongly recommended that workers wear respirators and other protective gear and have provided this equipment in the thousands. Respirators, when used properly, protect workers from exposure to contaminants.

Fortunately, EPA has more consistently found low levels of contaminants in the "breathing zone" — 5 to 7 feet above the debris pile — and undetectable levels away from the work site.

EPA also has collected and analyzed more than 1,300 air samples for asbestos

since Sept. 11. Only 28 were above the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act standard, and 27 of those were samples collected before Sept. 30.

Of course, individual samples represent only a snapshot at a moment in time, not the environmental conditions that would determine whether federal standards have been exceeded. Most health standards set by EPA and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration are based on exposure periods that cover anywhere from an eight-hour work day for occupational exposure to 30 years.

EPA is, however, taking the most conservative approach in assessing samples by evaluating results against strict standards. We're working with the appropriate health agencies to make recommendations that protect workers and the public.

Finally, EPA has made and continues to make information available to the public. We continue to update our Web site daily, presenting summaries of all environmental findings, including results that exceed federal standards. We also are making data available in a public information repository in our lower Manhattan offices.

The people of New York deserve all the information available in as useful and complete a form as possible.

Whitman is the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.