Critics: $100M dust-cleaning may be too little too late

■ **Damage may already be done for hundreds of downtown cleaning workers without protective gear since Sept. 11**

By MICHAEL WEISSENSTEIN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The government could spend $100 million or more to clean downtown apartments of dust from the World Trade Center collapse, but critics say the program may come months too late to help those who were at greatest risk.

"It would have been far, far better for the EPA to have done this much sooner," said Jonathan Bennett, spokesman for the nonprofit New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health. "It would have given people protection from things that are now in their lungs that they can't be protected from now."

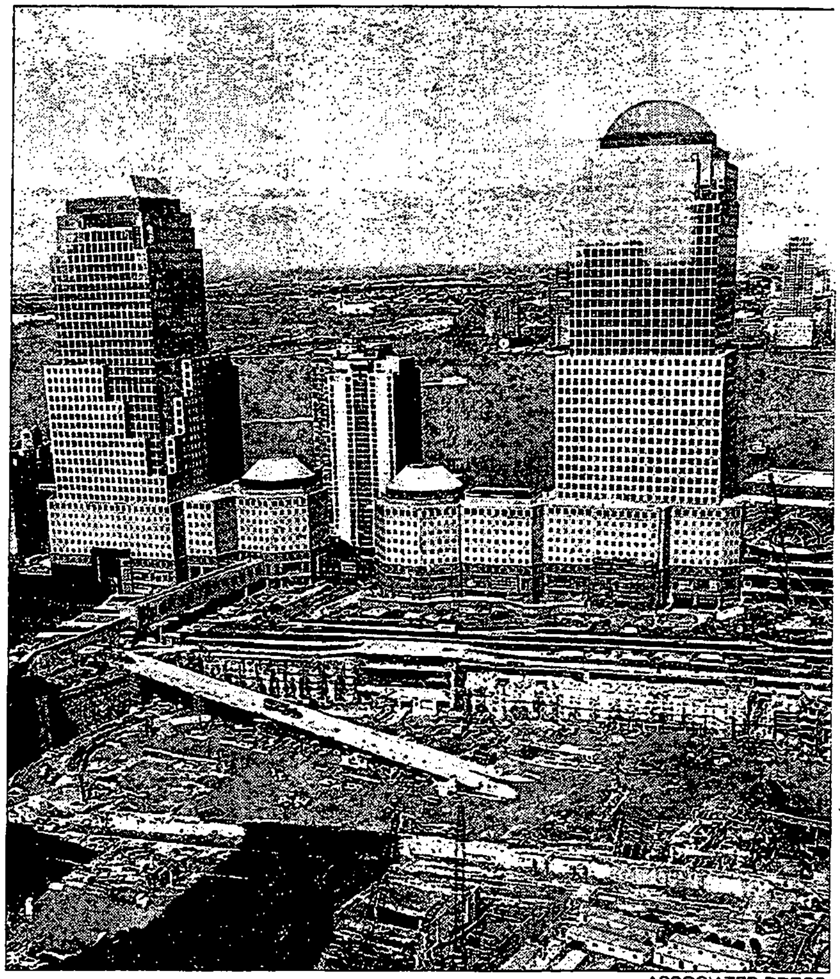
Federal and city environmental officials announced last week that they would spend unlimited funds to professionally clean and test air quality in the apartment of any resident who requests the work.

Samples of the dust that settled after the trade center collapse show varying amounts of asbestos, fiberglass and caustic concrete powder.

Labor advocates said this week that federal and city agencies left workers unnecessarily exposed for months.

Hundreds of cleaning workers — many of whom worked with inadequate protective gear — have reported respiratory ailments and other problems after cleaning dust-laden offices and apartments. These laborers face a slightly elevated risk of asbestos-related cancer in coming decades, scientists said.

Much cleanup work finished months ago — while government agencies were issuing conflicting and often reassuring assessments of risks posed by the dust.



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With the World Financial Center complex in the background, work continues at the site of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks.

The Environmental Protection Agency has not estimated an overall cost for the new cleanup program, spokeswoman Mary Mears said.

But industry officials said professional asbestos abatement could cost an average of $4,000 per apartment. The agency also is offering air testing and high-efficiency vacuum cleaners, which together could cost an additional $800 per apartment, on average.

Census figures show 23,700 occupied housing units below Canal Street, which could drive overall costs as high as $113 million if every resident asked for cleaning, testing and a vacuum cleaner.

Mears noted the agency believes far fewer than 23,000 apartment dwellers will request cleanup so the cost will be well below the top estimates. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has pledged unlimited funds to the cleanup effort.

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton asked FEMA in a letter yesterday to expand the cleaning program to include small businesses and a reimbursement program for residents who already have paid cleanup costs out of pocket.

Whatever the cost, scientists and EPA officials say the remaining dust poses little health risk.

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Expansion of bottle-deposit law sought

■ **The legislation would make New York's law one of the most comprehensive in the nation**

By JIM FITZGERALD
ASSOCIATED PRESS

YONKERS, N.Y. — Bottled water, energy drinks and fruit juices that now come in non-returnable containers would be added to the state's nickel-deposit law under a bill announced yesterday by Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.

The legislation would make New York's law one of the most comprehensive in the nation. Opposition came quickly from the beverage industry.

The bill would also redirect funds that the industry now gets to keep when returnable bottles aren't returned. The money, at least $84 million a year, would go to municipal recycling programs instead.

The existing law, meant to encourage recycling and reduce litter, "has been a phenomenal success at keeping billions of containers out of our landfills and off our streets," Spitzer said before a Yonkers news conference. "However, the bottle bill can be made even better if we update it to include categories of containers — like bottled water, sports drinks and fruit juices — that barely existed in the marketplace when the law was enacted in 1982."

Currently, the bottle-deposit law applies only to beer and soda containers. The bill adds non-carbonated beverages in bottles and cans, which Spitzer said now make up 22 percent of the beverage containers sold in the state.

Pat Franklin, executive director of the Container Recycling Institute, said expanding New York's bill is "the logical next step."

"The non-carbonated sector is the growth sector in the industry," she said. The current law is recovering containers at rates as high as 70 percent, she said.

Of the 10 states with bottle-deposit laws, only Maine and California have already updated theirs to include non-carbonated beverages.

The beverage industry, which fought the original law, lined up against the new proposal. Stephen Kay, spokesman for the International Bottled Water Association, said his group opposes any expansion of the bottle-deposit program, which he said "is not a system that works." Instead, he said, the industry supports curbside recycling.

Michael Vacek, president of the state Beer Wholesalers Association, said the unredeemed deposit funds were meant to offset the costs of the program to the industry. Taking the money away "would amount to nothing more than a hidden tax on beer and soft drinks," he said.

Spitzer said unclaimed deposits amount to a "windfall" for the beverage industry that would be better used in local recycling programs. He said that Massachusetts and Michigan, two other states with bottle-deposit laws, require that unclaimed deposits be returned to the state.

Assemblyman Thomas DiNapoli, D-Nassau, chairman of the Environmental Conservation Committee, is supporting the bill. He said it would also prohibit the dumping of recyclables at landfills and incinerators.

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