

NYC DEP to Complete Downtown Cleanup

November 6, 2002

By November 30, 2002, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) will officially complete a six-month effort to remove potentially hazardous dust and debris that accumulated on the roofs, windows and facades of downtown buildings following the World Trade Center (WTC) collapse. When the project draws to a close at the end of the month, crews will have cleaned more than 2.5 million square feet of exterior building space. The project has been a feat of labor and logistics with DEP crews working around the clock and making every possible accommodation to minimize disruptions to area residents, businesses and institutions.

The project began in January 2002, when the DEP began inspecting buildings in Lower Manhattan for exterior residue containing more than 1 percent of asbestos, the threshold set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Labor, New York State and the DEP. Among a small sample of buildings close to the WTC site, 48 percent tested positive for asbestos contamination. This finding prompted the DEP to begin a comprehensive inspection of the more than one thousand buildings in the area.

"There was great concern among people in Lower Manhattan," said Robert Avaltroni, Deputy Commissioner of the DEP. "We needed to act quickly to relieve that anxiety so people who live and work in the area could move forward with their lives."

The DEP inspected 1,072 buildings, of which 326 – less than 30 percent – were found to have some form of asbestos-contaminated WTC debris and were earmarked for cleaning. While much of the debris contained only trace amounts of asbestos well within the range of generally accepted standards, the DEP decided to have all 326 buildings cleaned to help alleviate public concern regarding potential exposure to asbestos and other contaminants.

The DEP notified the owners of the affected buildings, giving them the option to have the cleanup done by the DEP or through an independent contractor of their own choosing. The owners of 100 buildings elected to have their buildings cleaned independently. (The DEP has since re-inspected those buildings and certified that asbestos-containing material had been removed.)

On June 3, DEP cleanup crews went into action, working 24 hours a day, seven days a week – with the exception of major holidays and days when inclement weather made cleaning unsafe. To date, DEP contractors have cleaned 190 buildings totaling approximately 2.5 million square feet of building exterior space. Throughout the process – inspection, cleanup and re-inspection – the DEP has worked closely with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the EPA.

"We went into every crevice and every corner of the buildings we cleaned," said Avaltroni. "Wherever we saw debris, we removed it."

DEP crews reached building surfaces with cherry pickers, scaffolds and platforms. They used low-pressure spray-guns as well as their own hands to clean the debris. The New York City Department of Buildings (DOB) secured necessary permits and helped erect the scaffolds and riggings. When crews identified potential structural problems – including loose bricks and cracked facades – the DOB responded promptly to protect pedestrians.

Liz Berger, a long-time resident and employee in the area, appreciates the effort. "The City and the DEP were genuinely interested in understanding the issue and solving the problem," she

said. "Thanks to their dedication, I feel much better in my apartment and in the building where I work."