

Danger In The Dust

EPA assured public before actual testing

By Laurie Garrett
STAFF WRITER

In the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center, testing to monitor levels of debris dust didn't begin for 10 days — and analysis of the findings didn't become available until October. Months later EPA scientists would conclude that the dust caused lung disease in test animals — ailments that mimicked those reported in people who lived and worked near Ground Zero.

The Environmental Protection Agency was not in possession of information about the debris dust in the air when it assured New Yorkers, fewer than two days after the World Trade Center collapse, that the public had no reason for concern about the air being breathed.

In the tests, conducted in May 2002, EPA scientists exposed mice to dust from Ground Zero. The mice developed respiratory ailments, the severity of which closely corresponded to the dust levels, according to the study, which is available at www.epa.gov.

Though air monitoring for such specific substances as asbestos, lead and various heavy metals was under way throughout the city, testing the air for pulverized concrete and glass did not begin until Sept. 21, and in most locations not until October. The first results weren't available until Oct. 4.

According to an internal EPA report released Friday, the EPA was directed by the White House in the days after Sept. 11 to amend its press releases by adding reassuring statements and removing cautionary ones. On Sept. 16, the day before the stock market reopened, the EPA insisted, "Our tests show that it is safe for New Yorkers to go back to work in New York's financial district." Workers and residents shortly began returning to their downtown offices and homes.

"People went back to their apartments because [former EPA director] Christie Todd Whitman said it was safe," Dr. Steven Levin of The Mount Sinai Hospital said in an interview. "I have patients who knew it was wrong — they could feel it. But their employer said, 'The EPA says it's safe.'" Levin is studying the health of 6,100 patients in the wake of the disaster.

"If I have outrage over anything, this is it. Who do you believe? If you can't trust the EPA, it's a terrible consequence for public health."

Levin and other medical professionals say thousands of New Yorkers have developed respiratory illnesses associated with exposure to the dust.

Though physicians and scientists say they believe they can rule out long-term effects such as cancer, they are concerned about the potential for permanent sensitivities that cause sufferers to gasp for air. While scientists agree that people were harmed by the dust, the question is how many.

Though air quality has returned to normal for lower Manhattan and Brooklyn and poses no threat to public health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the New York City health department plan to follow thousands of people for more than a decade to monitor long-term health effects.

Because of the nature of the lung ailments they are seeing, Levin and other physicians say they are concerned about Ground Zero reconstruction, because the dust, diesel fumes and other airborne particles are likely to exacerbate the ailments.



Smoke rises from the World Trade Center debris at Ground Zero in October 2001.

Newsday Photo / Jiro Ose

"Some people are sure to have difficulty," Levin said. "No construction goes on without generating dust or smoke. So I'm definitely worried." At its public meetings, the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. has not addressed the issue of air quality during reconstruction.

The EPA initially monitored only for a narrow range of possible toxins and pollutants — those specified under the Clean Air Act — and not for those that doctors and researchers have pinpointed as most problematic: both large and fine particulates of pulverized concrete and glass.

On Sept. 11 fewer than a dozen air-sampling monitors — designed to do routine tests of air for violations of the Clean Air Act — were in place in downtown Manhattan and in Brooklyn. They were not designed to test particulate matter levels, but instead to measure levels of asbestos, lead, PCBs, dioxins, various heavy metals and assorted chemicals.

Though some monitors initially showed an uptick in the levels of some chemicals, including PCBs and asbestos, none reached a level that alarmed the EPA. Most levels returned to below regulatory standards within a week after the attacks.

The EPA's own publications and Web site show the first air samples collected for fine particulate analysis were taken around Ground Zero 10 to 15 days after the attack, and results weren't known until early October. Coarse particulate samples weren't collected until early October, after lower Manhattan streets had been cleaned and the bulk of the debris outside the immediate World Trade Center site had been removed.

Yet on Sept. 13, 2001, the EPA issued the following statement: "Monitoring and sampling conducted on Tuesday and Wednesday [Sept. 11 and 12] have

See AIR on A42

EPA Tests Came Later

AIR from A4

been very reassuring about potential exposure of rescue crews and the public to environmental contaminants ... the general public should be very reassured by initial sampling."

The EPA database shows it either collected or received from other federal, state and city agencies 66,000 dust and air samples between Sept. 11 and November 13, 2001. Almost none was available when the EPA pronounced the air safe to breathe.

Within minutes after the collapse of the first World Trade Center tower, "it was very apparent to us that this tragedy was a public health and environmental crisis. That was really apparent on Day One as we, like others, struggled to breathe," Dr. Isaac Weisfuse, assistant commissioner in the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, said in an interview this week. The city agency, as well as the EPA, scrambled to collect debris dust samples on Sept. 11, testing them first for lead, and results were available Sept. 12. The following day, the only new data concerned asbestos; about 25 percent of collected samples showed levels above the regulatory standard. By the time Whitman declared on Sept. 18 that "the air is safe to breathe," various agencies had collected and analyzed data for lead, asbestos, benzene and mercury.

The pulverized concrete and glass had an inordinately high alkali content — not unlike salt — and analysis of the first sample didn't occur until Sept. 28; most of the data would not be available until October.

"The issue of the dust in general was a concern early on, even if it wasn't supported by data," Weisfuse says, "because it was obvious people were choking."

Months later, a team of EPA scientists ran experiments on mice exposed to Ground Zero dust. Since human inhalation of such a concoction had never been studied, there was no way to know how much would be too much for a human lung.

The scientists exposed wild mice to various doses of the dust and discovered a direct dose/response relationship: The lower the dose of dust, the milder the symptoms. At higher doses the animals got Reactive

Airways Disease Syndrome, or RADS.

When the EPA scientists calculated what those mouse doses would mean to humans, they determined that a range of 42 to 425 micrograms per cubic meter of air would be sufficient, in a single exposure, to cause RADS in humans. This EPA mouse study has not been published in a medical or scientific journal.

According to the EPA's monitoring data, posted on its Web site, several air and dust sampling stations in Manhattan gave readings in that range when tests were run. A sampling on Park Row came up at 42.4 micrograms per cubic meter on Sept. 26; on Sept. 21, a sample gathered at Albany and West streets measured 40.6; a week later, that site recorded a 137.7 level.

The EPA scientists who conducted the mouse study wrote in their report that even one day of exposure to such levels "could have contributed to development of pulmonary inflammation, airway hyper-responsiveness, and manifestations of sensory irritation such as cough."

Treatment for RADS involves the same types of anti-inflammatory inhalants and drugs used for asthma.

Last week's internal EPA report revealed that the agency's optimistic language on air quality was ordered by the White House National Security Council and Council on Environmental Quality, or CEQ. Speaking yesterday on WNYC radio, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who has called for a Senate investigation of the White House's role, said, "Time and again the government said to us — I mean months later — 'it's safe'. I think it would be very important to find out what was the collaborative process in the White House. Who did change those press releases?"

Acting EPA Administrator Marianne Horinko declined to identify who at the White House was involved. "Why would we purposely mislead people about a national tragedy?" she asked. She charged that the internal EPA report was "pure political conjecture" motivated by unstated ill will in the agency's inspector general's office.

The key player in the White House campaign to soften concerns about New York's air was, according to Washington sources, CEQ director James Connaughton. He had worked for the law firm Sidley Austin Brown & Wood, in its environmental practice group, until shortly before the attack, and had represented mining companies accused of pollution offenses. Calls to the White House for comment were not returned, nor were interview requests to the National Security Council.

The EPA, in its written rebuttal to the internal report, insists that residents of downtown Manhattan were under the guidance of the city health department, not the EPA. Decisions regarding when it was safe to return to homes and offices, how best to clean those facilities, and what precautions ought to be taken were the result, the rebuttal says, of "guidance" that was "provided by New York City."

But almost from 9/11, Weisfuse said, the EPA was in conference calls with city and state health agencies, during which "data was reviewed" and policy was discussed.