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 Caustic dust blankets World Trade Center area
 By Andrew Schneider
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The Environmental Protection Agency has decked out lamp poles on almost every block of lower Manhattan with clusters of air monitors and vacuum pumps to measure contaminants in the air from the collapsed World Trade Center. These monitors are of little or no value when it comes to determining the health hazard from dust contaminating apartments and offices. (Kevin Manning <mailto:kmanning@post-dispatch.com>/P-D)
 NEW YORK - Even as the dust from the collapsed World Trade Center was still settling, top government scientists were determining that the smoky gray mixture was highly corrosive and potentially a serious danger to health.

The U.S. Geological Survey team found that some of the dust was as caustic as liquid drain cleaner and alerted all government agencies involved in the emergency response. But many of those on the front lines of protecting the health of the public and workers cleaning up the site say they never got the information.

"I'm supposed to be in the loop, and I've never heard any specific numbers on how caustic the dust actually was," said Dr. Robin Herbert, co-director of the Mount Sinai Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine.
 "There is a large segment of the population here whose physicians needed to know that information that USGS submitted. Exposure to dust with a high pH could impact everyone, but especially the very young, the very old and those with existing pulmonary disease." Census data show large concentrations of young and elderly living near the World Trade Center site.

The EPA's office in New York said it repeatedly told the public that the dust was caustic because of the cement that was pulverized when the towers collapsed. But an examination of all the EPA's public and press statements made since Sept. 11 found nothing that warned of the very high pH levels found by the Geological Survey scientists. Nor did the statements disclose the specific levels that the EPA's own testing found.

"We've not heard of EPA or anyone else releasing information on specific pH levels in the dust, and that's information that we all should have had," said Carrie Loewenherz, an industrial hygienist for the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, which provides assistance to more than 250 unions.

"It's the specific numbers - those precise pH levels - that we need to make the appropriate safety decisions for the workers, and they were never released," Loewenherz said. "The dust, once it's in contact with moist tissue, the throat, the mouth, nasal passages, the eyes and even sweaty skin, it becomes corrosive and can cause severe burns."

Most of the samples taken by USGS' team had a pH of 9.5 to 10.5, about the same alkalinity as ammonia. Two samples that were taken inside a high-rise apartment and in a gymnasium across from the wreckage of the World Trade Center had a pH of 11.8 to 12.1 - equivalent to what would be found in liquid drain cleaner.

The degree of acidity or alkalinity in a material is expressed as a pH measurement. Neutral pH - like water - is 7 on a 15-point scale. Lower than 7, to 0, is an indication of acid. Higher than 7, to 14, the top of the scale, is alkaline. Levels near either end of the pH scale can harm the health of people and animals.

Bruce Lippy, Loewenherz's counterpart with the operating engineers union, is responsible for the 300 workers running heavy equipment at ground zero.

"Part of the dilemma we faced was not knowing precisely what was in the dust," Lippy said. "We knew it was caustic but had no information on exactly how caustic it was. I was trying to get people to wear the respirators, but if I knew how high the pH levels were, I could have been more persuasive in convincing the workers of the dangers."

Only a handful of the 100 or so workers sorting wreckage and loading trucks on the site over three days last week were seen wearing respirators or protective masks.

Scientists rush to Manhattan

Like the rest of the world, the USGS team watched the storm of dust roll across Manhattan after the terrorist attack on Sept. 11. With its world-class laboratories and sensors that can detect minerals on a distant planet, the Denver-based team was already making arrangements to get NASA's infrared sensors and aircraft over ground zero as the EPA and the U.S. Public Health Service requested its help.

Responding to requests from the White House science office, the NASA team flew over Manhattan four times between Sept. 16 and Sept. 23, while USGS scientists collected samples of the dust from 35 locations below.

Back in Denver, more than two dozen scientists using the world's most sophisticated analytical equipment ran the samples through extensive testing.

The Geological Survey's test results were posted Sept. 27 on a Web site restricted to government agencies.

The USGS findings were "evaluated by our technical experts and found to be consistent with the findings of EPA's Office of Research and Development," said Bonnie Bellow, the agency's spokeswoman in New York.

"The USGS data was also discussed by an interagency group of scientists, epidemiologists and health officials," Bellow said.

But neither the EPA headquarters nor its New York office would comment on what came out of these discussions or which EPA results they were "consistent" with.

The USGS data on pH levels were not released by the EPA, nor apparently were the environmental agency's own test results on the dust.

"It is extremely distressing to learn that the EPA knew how caustic samples of the dust were and didn't publicize the information immediately, or make sure that OSHA publicized it," said Joel Shufro, executive director of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health.

"If we had known at the time exactly how caustic the dust could be, we would have been in a better position to make informed decisions about respiratory protection to recommend and about the urgency of ensuring that workers and residents followed those recommendations," Shufro said.

"It is inexcusable for EPA to have kept silent for so long about such a potential hazard."

Dust weakens strapping youth

John Healy Jr. is 15, big, taller than his father. He looks as strong as a bull. But when he talks, wheezes and deep coughs punctuate his words. He and his father, John, live in an apartment overlooking what was the World Trade Center.

"Something is tearing him up, hitting his lungs hard," said his father. "He had asthma when he was younger, but he was fine until after Sept. 11. If I knew the dust was that caustic, there's no way I would have brought him back here."

John goes to Stuyvesant High School, a 10-story building for the brightest of the bright. It's one block from the collapsed buildings and beside the Hudson River, where barges are being filled with debris destined for sorting at the Fresh Kills landfill.

"I need to go to this school, and I need to live here to do it, but something in that dust is just hurting me," the teen said as he looked down at the pile of pills, throat sprays and inhalers in his two large hands.

His father looked out the narrow dining room window at the brightly lighted carnage bellow. A light film of dust coated the window.

"I can't understand why the government didn't tell us what was actually in the dust," Healy said. "Were they afraid we were going to panic? I needed that information to decide what was best for my son. I needed it."

The teen's malady and other serious problems are being seen by physicians throughout New York.

"What we're finding is incredible irritation to the lungs, throat and nasal passages," said Herbert, from Mount Sinai. "Some of the tissue is cherry red, vivid, bright, and we've never seen anything like it before."

"There are a large number of clinicians and public health specialists who are struggling to reconcile the health problems they're seeing with the exposure data they're being given," Herbert said. "The high pH in the dust may be a part of the answer. If the government had these pH readings of 11 and 12, the public and their physicians should have been told."

"Any credible information the government had relating to health issues just should have been released," she said. "There is no justification for holding it. You don't conceal the information from those who need it."

A dubious honor

Mark Rushing and Tori Bunch have the debatable honor of having lived in one of the sites that USGS tested. In fact, their apartment on the 30th floor of a building overlooking the World Trade Center tied for highest pH - 12.1 - of the dozens of sites where samples were collected.

"It's obvious to those of us living here that the government - city, state and federal - wanted things to return to normal as quickly as possible. The economic losses were great," Rushing said. "But no matter how you view it, that's no excuse for the government, any government, to conceal hazards from

the people they are charged with protecting."

Rushing and Bunch found a new apartment as far from the World Trade Center as they could get and still be in the city. The apartment is on the lowest floor available.

Even within the EPA, professionals believe the agency did a disservice by not acknowledging and releasing the Geological Survey's data.

Cate Jenkins, a senior environmental scientist in the hazardous materials division at the EPA headquarters, said: "The pH levels the USGS documented were far too high for EPA to ignore. They insisted that all the information regarding health and safety was being released to the public. Well, that's not true. There's nothing, internally or in public releases, that shows the agency ever disclosed specific pH levels."

Late Thursday, the EPA's Bellow told the Post-Dispatch: "We have no specific data on pH levels." Bellow added, "This is all the available information on the subject."

Late Friday, the EPA responded to the question of why it didn't collect its own pH numbers.

"EPA had enough information about the alkalinity of the material from the World Trade Center without doing further analysis," Bellow said.

The question of why EPA didn't release the data it had had remains unanswered.

The EPA is in a no-win situation. No government agency had been prepared for the enormity of the terrorist attack on New York. Tight budgets - federal, state and city - ruled out planning and drills for an unfathomable event of this size.

Even most critics say that no amount of preparation could have kept the workers fleeing the twin towers - and the rescue workers racing to save them - from sucking in lungfuls of toxic dust and smoke.

But it's what the EPA and OSHA and the New York state and city health departments did after the dust settled and the smoke cleared that has generated the most criticism.

On Monday, Rep. Jerrold Nadler, the New York Democrat who represents the people in lower Manhattan, is holding a congressional hearing to determine who dropped the ball. He is expected to announce that legislation will be introduced to "force EPA to do the proper testing inside offices and apartments and release the finding in a form that would be of value to the public and their physicians."

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., has scheduled a Senate investigation of the issue.

Less than a week after the attack, on Sept. 16, EPA Administrator Christie Todd Whitman told New Yorkers: "There's no need for the general public to be concerned."

That was the same day that USGS and NASA flew their first sampling missions over the city.

The EPA said its boss's comments that there were no dangers from dioxin, benzene, PCB or asbestos - all cancer-causing agents - were based on thousands of outside air samples. Last month, the Post-Dispatch reported that high levels of asbestos were found in many apartments and offices. The EPA said its regulations did not call for indoor testing.

Hundreds of firefighters, paramedics and police officers are sick, suffering what some physicians call "ground zero coughs." Their problems may have come from unprotected exposure the first week of the attack.

But hundreds of other people - workers, students and residents - who fled the area and stayed out for weeks and then came back also are suffering major respiratory problems.

The few Christmas decorations that adorned light poles in lower Manhattan have been removed. But the metal poles still bristle with air monitors and vacuum pumps sucking in air almost around the clock, searching for asbestos fibers, chemicals and traces of heavy, toxic metals.

For the most part, the EPA and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration say they're finding little, if anything, for New Yorkers to worry about.

They are talking about contaminants in the air, which is the main pathway for toxic materials to enter the body.

But the EPA pays little or no attention to indoor contamination.

Late Friday, the New York City health department issued a brief statement, with very few details, about both indoor and outdoor testing done by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. This well-respected research arm for the Department of Health and Human Services, found pulverized fiberglass in almost half of the samples it examined. However, New York health officials released no specifics on the levels of toxic material found, and no one could be reached for comment.

Attention is being paid to keeping the contamination on the site. Trucks hauling debris from ground zero pass through an EPA drive-through shower before they reach the streets. City street sweepers and washers drive a seemingly endless circle up and down the streets of lower Manhattan.

But even blocks from the collapse, massive windows on offices and cornices on many apartment buildings are still caked with dust.

"We made this analytical effort because we were concerned about the likelihood that the composition of the dust could be potentially harmful to the rescue and cleanup workers at the site and to people living and working in lower Manhattan," said USGS team member Geoffrey Plumlee, a geochemist who determined the pH levels.

"We shared our findings with EPA, FEMA, the federal emergency response coordinator and everyone else we felt was appropriate. We anticipated that the results would have been shared with the people on the ground, those at risk, but it looks like the information never got to those who needed it."