

A NATION CHALLENGED: The Aftermath in New York

THE AIR QUALITY

Contaminants Below Levels
For Long-Term ConcernsBy KIRK JOHNSON
with ANDREW C. REVKIN

The quality of the air has become a matter of widespread anxiety among people who live or work in Lower Manhattan — anxiety compounded in many cases by open disbelief in assurances from government and public health officials that the air, while acrid and sometimes smelly, is generally safe to breathe.

Local residents and workers in downtown buildings say they fear that burning eyes, runny noses and scratchy throats — common maladies below 14th Street, especially at night — could be an indicator of something worse that is not being measured at all. For many people, the plume of dust and smoke that continues to be a presence downtown has become part of the nightmare itself: in an altered New York, even the air, it seems, is no longer what it was.

But independent testing by a company hired by The New York Times has concluded that the outdoor street level air in the vicinity of the trade center site does not contain poisons or toxic substances, especially lead and asbestos, in levels sufficient to raise long-term public health concern. The results, according to the report by Adelaide Associates of Brewster, N.Y., essentially mirrored the findings that have been reached and widely reported by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

"Adelaide's conclusions support the E.P.A. and New York City claims that there are no significant health risks," the report said.

Adelaide sampled air for asbestos and lead and fine particle dust and found that, in all three categories, levels were below the federal government's health standards. One of the company's four monitoring stations, at the corner of Rector and Greenwich, exceeded the E.P.A.'s safety standard for asbestos, but was below the standards set by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Air testing, how it works and what it reveals or does not, has become part of the uneasy fabric of life in the areas around the disaster site. And health experts stress that the risks to workers directly at the ground zero cleanup site are genuine. Respiratory protection for cleanup crews, physicians say, remains essential. Volatile organic compounds like benzene, for example, have been measured directly in the smoke plume

itself, but disperse so quickly into the environment that sensors a block or two away show no measurement at all.

But the experts also say that the raging, often emotional debate about air issues downtown, many of them revolving around the question of asbestos, have left many residents deeply misinformed about the relative risks of exposure that they do face every day. And government tests that turn up negative do not seem to explain everything, either. Why, for example, does the air these days make a person's throat feel so raw and ragged?

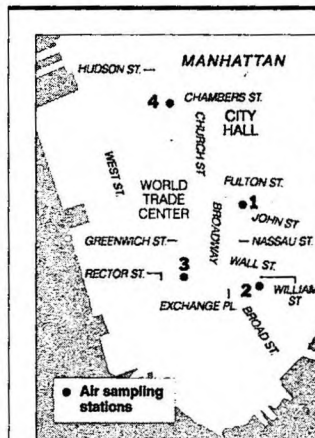
Health experts say there are also many unknowns about the exact mixture of elements that people were exposed to in the early days after the attacks, when the smoke and dust were at their worst. Some predict that there could be more cases of asthma in the city over time, though most say that one-time exposures, even if severe, are generally shrugged off by the body. Different ways of measuring asbestos have also raised concerns that the government tests do not pick up supersmall particles of asbestos fibers that might be dangerous.

But the results obtained by The Times, and interviews with independent health experts around the country and at the E.P.A., also suggest strongly that emotion and anxiety have elevated concerns about the air far beyond the levels shared by most scientists and public health experts.

"There's little risk to the general public of any ongoing air pollution related to the World Trade Center," said Patrick L. Kinney, an associate professor of environmental health sciences at Columbia University, who has monitored air testing results and was briefed about Adelaide's findings.

Professor Kinney and other experts say that the raw throats and sinuses that many residents and workers complain about are in fact mostly evidence of the body's defensive systems. Large particles of dust that get trapped in nasal and throat passages trigger irritation, but that also means that most of the particles are not making it all the way to the lungs.

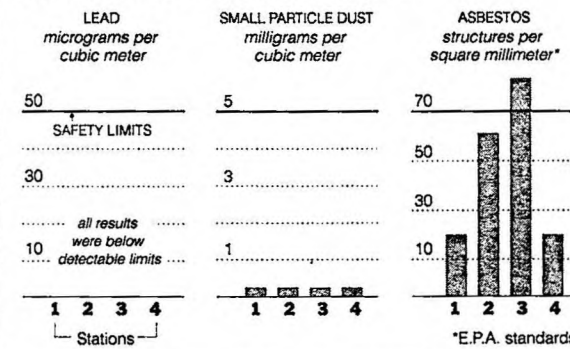
Smaller particles, called respirable dust, which can penetrate deeply into the lungs and are a greater health concern, were not found in significant quantities at street level



Source: Adelaide Associates, LLC

Air Quality Readings

Results of safety tests at four stations downtown.



The New York Times



Nicola Bengiveno/The New York Times

An environmental scientist removing an air quality sample from an Environmental Protection Agency station near Pine and William Streets. Downtown residents are worried about what they may be breathing.

by Adelaide, which also confirms recent government tests.

Other concerns have been raised about supersmall particles of asbestos. Recent news reports have suggested, for example, that the smallest asbestos fibers, smashed into tiny pieces by the cataclysm when the twin towers collapsed, could be more dangerous than the 0.5 micron-and-larger size that are measured by the

E.P.A. and most testing organizations, including Adelaide.

Scientists say that there is genuine debate on that point, but that by an overwhelming number, studies on asbestos exposure have found the larger particles to be far more dangerous because they tend to embed themselves in lung tissue. Smaller fibers, though they can penetrate more deeply into lungs, can also be

more readily attacked and removed by the body's internal defenses, most studies say.

Other impressions by residents do have a basis in science, environmental experts said. For example, there appears to be a tendency for the smell and air quality to worsen at night, and this is consistent with the way air circulates in the city, said Dr. George D. Thurston, an associate

professor of environmental medicine at the New York University School of Medicine, who is involved in a study analyzing the constituents in dust and soot.

He said winds that tend to sweep pollution away during the day generally ebb at night. He also said that as pavement and buildings cool at night, there are fewer updrafts of warm air that stir the atmosphere and blend clear air from higher elevations with dirtier air near the streets.

The result, he said, is that the faint persistent plume of emissions from the attack site "is sort of prowling the city overnight, meandering. And that's what they're smelling."

He, too, agreed with the authorities that there was no sign of a clear health risk to residents, but he quickly added that "prudent avoidance remains the best approach for any resident or worker downtown."

"It's a basic public health principle," Dr. Thurston said. "If you can avoid an exposure, you do so."

Peter M. Iwanowicz, the director of environmental health for the American Lung Association of New York State, said his organization had been receiving calls from a steady string of residents unnerved by the persistently acrid air.

"The visceral human reaction to this is, this smell is not natural, so there must be something wrong, something toxic," he said. But, he added, smells can be a red herring: "Take a skunk. What it lets loose is pretty noxious, but it won't hurt you. Compare that to carbon monoxide, which is odorless and can kill you."

Over all, he said, the lung association still tends to agree with public officials that any threat is limited to possible aggravation of breathing problems in people prone to asthma or other respiratory ailments.

Other experts say there may be other air issues yet to emerge. Altered traffic patterns and increased congestion from heightened security at the city's bridge's and tunnels, for example, have created long lines of idling vehicles, which pollute the air far more than cars and trucks moving on the highways. Exhaust from gasoline-fired electricity generators and diesel vehicles involved in the cleanup are another issue should be monitored over time, they say.

But raw throats and sore eyes, one environmental expert said, should generally be likened to the effect of sitting by a campfire.

"If the smoke gets in your eyes, they burn, but it doesn't mean you're going to go blind," said Donald R. Blake, a professor of chemistry at the University of California at Irvine. "This is a tough thing that people in New York are dealing with," he said. "But we're talking here about a short-term issue."

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WSJ 10/19/01

The EPA Comes Clean on Asbestos

By KIMBERLEY A. STRASSEL

No more than a few hours after the World Trade Center fell, the media were reporting that the north tower had contained 40 floors of asbestos, all of which was now swirling around downtown Manhattan. City health officials, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and, most importantly, the Environmental Protection Agency, landed on the scene to conduct air-quality tests. What they did next was nothing less than astonishing: They said it was safe to be downtown.

For anyone who knows the history of these agencies, such proclamations are akin to heresy. For decades, the EPA has taken the lead in zero-tolerance policies toward any "carcinogenic" substance unlucky enough to have caught its eye—whether it be pesticides, Hudson River PCBs or asbestos. This draconian approach has served to encourage unfounded health scares, and created an environment in which people no longer make rational decisions about health risks. It has also led to the nightmare of trial lawyers, lawsuits and corporate bankruptcies.

But on Sept. 11, as with so many things, the EPA's world changed. Faced with a public health scare that could have sent thousands in Manhattan fleeing the city or jamming hospitals, the EPA decided to cough up the truth about asbestos. Its officials bent over backward to get out the message that asbestos was harmful only if breathed at high levels and over sustained periods of time. When reporters pointed out that some of the tests had exceeded the EPA's safety levels, the agency hurried to explain that this was a "stringent standard based on long-term exposure" and repeated that the public was not at any real risk.

The EPA's truthful words went only so far to contain fear. Some have still refused to move home or return to work. But that's not surprising, given the agency's history with asbestos. Over the past few decades, there probably has not been a substance more likely to strike irrational fear in a public's heart, and the EPA bears a lot of the blame.

The war against asbestos started in the 1950s, when a scientist, Irving Selkoff, found links between cancer and workers in asbestos-using industries. Asbestos was used in everything from walls and floors to hotpads and hairdryers. The EPA jumped in by the 1970s, with dire warnings that asbestos should be eradicated. Schools, public institutions and homeowners spent billions in removal. By the 1980s, better science said the risks were greatly exaggerated. But the EPA continued to insist on tough rules for everyone from building planners to haulers.

In the 1990s, even the EPA was beginning to wonder what it had unleashed. A report the EPA did itself in 1992 suggested the agency had mismanaged the affair. But by this time a fearful public, buttressed by a bureaucracy of labor unions,

parental groups, plaintiff's lawyers and school officials, was resisting any backing off in the war.

This has corroded the economy. At least 40 companies have gone into bankruptcy as the result of questionable lawsuits. Federal Mogul, which fell some weeks ago, wasn't even an asbestos manufacturer, but had the bad luck of inheriting one in a corporate deal. With hundreds of thousands of lawsuits pending, many people with legitimate, serious illnesses have been shortchanged as plaintiff's lawyers rush to file suits for people who haven't shown any symptoms of an asbestos-related disease.

In fact, scientists today actually know some real things about asbestos. A naturally occurring mineral, asbestos comes in several forms: "Blue" asbestos, because of its fiber type, shape and size, is considered most dangerous. "White" asbestos, used in the WTC, constitutes over 90% of asbestos products in place in the U.S. and is far less harmful. Asbestos is associated with three major diseases—asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. Nearly all of these ailments, however, strike people who, largely for occupational reasons, were exposed to asbestos at high levels and over a long period of time. For everyone else, the risks are extremely low: Should you simply sit in a building containing asbestos, you are more likely to be hit by lightning than you are to die a premature death from asbestos.

For all these reasons, it made sense for EPA head Christie Whitman to offer her soothing words about downtown. By about three weeks after the collapse, the EPA had taken 442 air samples, only 27 of which showed levels of asbestos above its most stringent standards. Many readings were taken in the immediate WTC site, and samples outside that area were even lower. The main risks, if any, are posed to the emergency workers, although they have been warned to wear protective masks. It is a shame that the truth has emerged only in the course of a catastrophe, and that the EPA had to expend so much energy calming a public that should have known the facts long ago.

The downtown scare, and others like it, has frustrated scientists. They point out that untold sums of public money have gone toward eradicating a nonexistent health problem, money that could have been better spent on practically any public good. And that doesn't evaluate the bigger cost to society. Says Elizabeth M. Whelan, president of the American Council on Science and Health: "Every moment we waste scaring our kids about hypothetical risks like those posed by trace exposure to asbestos, is a moment we could be focusing on real health risks, like smoking, not wearing seatbelts or not using bike helmets. Public health policies should focus on established risks, not phantom risks."

Indeed, public health agencies should learn from this event, and start to come clean on other zero-threshold policies to-

ward "carcinogens." Even as the EPA calms Manhattan about asbestos, it is demanding that General Electric spend billions to dredge the Hudson of PCBs—a substance that has never been proven to cause cancer in humans. And it continues to debate incredibly stringent and costly new arsenic rules, even though there is no real proof that this would save lives.

Sept. 11 put things in perspective. Americans have now seen what it is like to deal with real risks: of bioterrorism, of plane hijackings, of falling skyscrapers. Whether or not we have a one-in-a-million chance of getting cancer from trace levels of a substance is now a particularly silly question. Americans, today, need to be able to make sound and reasonable health decisions. We should be able to look to our public health organizations for the truth about risks, not paranoid overstatement.

Ms. Strassel is an assistant features editor at the Journal. Her OpinionJournal.com column appears on alternate Thursdays.

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AFTERMATH: NEW YORK

EPA Is Doubted on Testing at Attack Site

By QUEENA KIM

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The massive cloud of dust that made its way through the narrow streets of the financial district on the day of the attack settled onto cars and seeped into apartment and office buildings.

On Friday, the Environmental Protection Agency said in a statement that it had taken a total of 101 dust samples at the World Trade Center site. Of those, only 37 samplings contained "slightly" more than 1% of asbestos, the amount after which something is classified as "asbestos-containing." An amount above the 1% threshold requires certain precautions, such as masks, when handling the material.

But some area residents have been skeptical of the EPA's findings and as a result, private and civic groups have paid for independent testing for asbestos as well as other potential contaminants.

One sample taken from the rooftop of a building near City Hall, about 10 blocks from the World Trade Center site, contained 4.5% asbestos, according to Eastern Analytical Services Inc., a laboratory in Elmsford, N.Y. Samples taken from a windowsill of the same building showed 2.5% asbestos. The laboratory conducted the tests for a New York real-estate company that didn't want to be named. Asbestos is a fiber that once was widely used as a fire retardant, and when inhaled can cause lung scarring and cancer.

Experts have stressed that with certain exceptions, asbestos poses permanent health risks only after long-term exposure. But resi-



Indoor and outdoor air quality remains a big concern for many companies and individuals despite officials saying asbestos levels are safe.

dents in the downtown area are concerned that the EPA hasn't been quick to test for other hazardous substances such as PCBs and lead. The EPA also has been slow to release details of the specific locations of their tests and the levels of pollutants they've found, said a spokeswoman for New York City council-

woman Kathryn Freed.

An EPA spokeswoman said the agency has conducted tests for a wide range of contaminants but hasn't been able to release the raw data to the public because the agency is overwhelmed at present. The spokeswoman said the EPA has tested the air for PCBs, but still is awaiting the results.

Community Board 1, representing several neighborhoods in southern Manhattan, including Battery Park City, brought in two industrial-chemical consultants, Eric Chatfield and John Kominski, last week to collect dust and air samples. "The information we've been getting has been very limp," said Community Board 1 Chairwoman Madelyn Wils.

Last week, the two consultants and Ms. Wils sneaked into an apartment in Battery Park City and one on Warren Street, some 10 blocks north of the site of the twin towers, to take samples. The consultants declined to comment until the tests are completed, Ms. Wils said; results aren't due until next week.

In the financial district, Brookfield Properties Corp., owner of One Liberty Plaza and towers one, two and four of the World Financial Center complex, said it had hired an environmental consultant. The company has run tests and brought in workers, who wear safety uniforms and masks, to do the environmental cleanup. The cleanup is almost completed for One Liberty Plaza, and is underway at One World Financial Center, said Larry Graham, senior vice president of operations and development at Brookfield.

Among the Heroes, a Dog Called Porkchop

Continued From First Page

ical technicians. They must be unflustered in the face of screaming people and earth-moving equipment and physically capable of moving through confined spaces and even climbing ladders. Though many police department K-9 units have visited the site, the local urban search-and-rescue teams tend to have the most rigorously trained dogs, some of which meet standards of performance set by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

They must learn new tricks that oppose their instincts. When a dog runs, it digs its claws into the ground. When the surface moves, a dog tends to jump off. But cadaver dogs learn to keep their feet spread without disturbing anything in their path. That's why many don't use the flood of dog booties donated to the site.

They learn to crouch, lowering their center of gravity, when rubble shifts beneath them, says Shirley Hammond, a 67-year-old canine search specialist from Pajo Alto, Calif. Her deep-chested Doberman pinscher, Metrodoba Spicay's Sunny

are trained to lie down. Rescue specialists move in to seek out what the dogs have located.

To counter the cut pads, exposure to chemicals and dehydration, the public health service has deployed the Veterinary Assistance Medical Team, or VMAT. Working 12-hour shifts, those men and women and volunteer veterinarians staff a medical station in the middle of West Street, near Chambers Street, a few blocks north of the Trade Center ruins.

A 50-foot tent has a table of syringes, stations for ear cleaning and eye cleaning, cabinets of gauze and bandages, bags of intravenous solutions hanging from posts, Musher's Secret paw protection and enough toys, bones and biscuits to stock a pet shop. A sign hanging inside reads, "Emergency Horns. 1 Horn=Silence. 3 Blasts=Evacuate."

Last Saturday night was quiet. As vets changed shifts at 11 p.m., no dog showed up for hours. Then Cara, a two-year-old Beauceron herding dog, arrived. She had

German Shepherd working as a patrol dog for the New York City Police Department. Dwyer, his ears pointing behind him, was suffering from diarrhea and was still skittish from being nipped on the rump by another dog. Mitch Biederman, a volunteer vet, said Dwyer suffered from stress colitis. Another vet gave him a physical and dispensed an antibiotic.

At 6 o'clock, a shift change took place, and with the Con Edison and Verizon telephone workers streaming northward, the dogs arrived. First was Kinsey, a black Labrador retriever who wagged her body more than her tail. The vet took her temperature and cleaned her up. She grabbed a braided chew toy as her handler noted that there is the scent of decaying flesh "everywhere. It's overwhelming."

Cholo, a German Shepherd, came in next. Like most of the specialty dogs, he is part of an urban search-and-rescue crew, this one from Texas. But he searches for survivors, not cadavers. And he didn't find anybody on his shift, said Bert Withers, the search manager. To avoid depressing the dogs after a disappointing day, some

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