



AP Photo

TIME OUT. A rescue worker takes a much-needed break Thursday morning at Two Financial Center after hours of working at what's left of the World Trade Center. Work crews bravely endured thoughts of unsteady buildings, and conflicting word of possible collapses.

Tests: Dust Not a Danger Here

Air-quality concerns were focused back on the immediate area surrounding the World Trade Center blast site Friday as tests showed no health hazard from the foul-smelling smoke plume that at times this week has extended as far away as central Suffolk County.

Heavy rains and shifting winds Friday reduced the smoke and burning odors that had plagued large portions of the metropolitan area this week, and on Friday officials released the results of air tests conducted Thursday that showed no evidence of any airborne asbestos or other harmful contaminants outside of lower Manhattan.

"From a health perspective, there's no reason at all to tell people to avoid being outside," said Suffolk County Health Commissioner Clare Bradley. Test results were similarly comforting in Nassau and Queens.



AP Photo

People use towels and masks Tuesday to block smoke after towers collapsed.

In lower Manhattan, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, tapping emergency cleanup funds

under the federal Superfund program, has launched an elaborate air testing program that includes six new monitoring stations and a high-tech portable unit that will be parked close to the blast site.

Dust samples taken at the site have shown relatively high levels of asbestos, a carcinogen.

EPA spokeswoman Bonnie Bellow said Friday that air tests Thursday in two federal buildings in lower Manhattan — 290 Broadway and 26 Federal Plaza — did find airborne asbestos, but that none of the samples exceeded one-tenth of the maximum level allowed in workplaces by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

"There's nothing at this point that indicates that business can't resume" in the Wall Street area on Monday as scheduled, she added.

— Dan Fagin

The Toll

5,000 and counting
Estimated deaths nationally

World Trade Center

111 Bodies recovered

59 Dead identified

184 Official Death Toll

4,300 People injured

The Missing at World Trade Center:

4,717

Names on the missing persons list including:

202 Firefighters

54 Police/Port Authority
Officers

157 Airline passengers/crew

Other Dead

126 at the Pentagon

109 Airline passengers/crew

Figures as of 9:30 p.m. last night

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HURRICANE TACKS

Asbestos Targeted In Cleanup Effort

EPA's Whitman: 'No reason for concern'

By Hugo Kugiya

STAFF WRITER

Hundreds of asbestos cleanup workers representing more than a dozen local unions and several contractors continued the massive and delicate task of removing the contaminant yesterday from buildings damaged by the collapse of the World Trade Center.

In the meantime, Christine Todd Whitman, head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said yesterday that "there is no reason for concern," saying that the latest measurements of debris and air at ground zero and in areas tested in the financial district show the amount of asbestos is at or below background levels, which she defined as 1 percent or less of the total sample.

While there is no doubt the debris from the collapse contains asbestos and that some was released into the atmosphere, Whitman said the situation is better than she had hoped. She said the EPA has regularly sampled dust, air and the persistent plume of smoke and particles rising from the wreckage. The highest recorded reading was 4.5 percent, Whitman said.

After taking readings from as far away as Brooklyn and New Jersey, the EPA is concentrating on a 10-block area surrounding ground zero, with help from 24-hour air monitors. Whitman said she is concerned about any reading above 1 percent. Generally, asbestos-related disease arises only from prolonged exposure, although there is no level of exposure that is known with certainty to be safe.

Nonetheless, some building owners themselves have hired companies to clean up the dust and debris blown into their buildings, treating the material as asbestos.

LVI Services Inc., based in Manhattan, the largest abatement and environmental cleanup company in the country, according to its president Burton T. Fried, has been hired by Verizon to clean its headquarters next to the World Trade Center site. He said he expects his com-

taminated with asbestos but declined to name which ones. While levels are generally low in the area and in buildings, strict removal procedures are being followed, Fried said.

"We have responded in other cases of disaster and can work in trying situations," Fried said yesterday. "We're addressing this situation with care. We have trained labor who have all the permits and know all the proper techniques for doing this kind of work. . . . There is no substitute for manpower in this kind of work."

Fried said LVI was hired to clean up asbestos-contaminated buildings damaged by Hurricane Hugo, and during both the Bay Area and Los Angeles earthquakes.

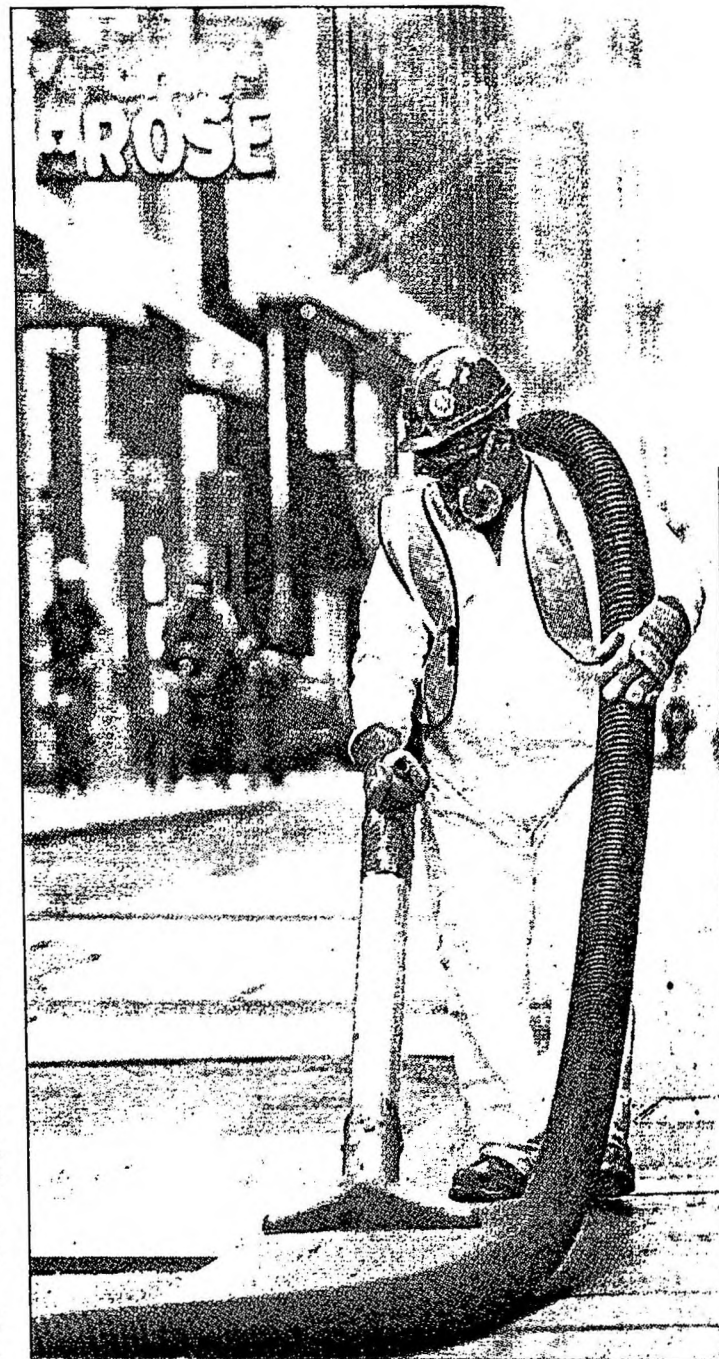
In most cases, the buildings are first sealed. Compressors then create negative air pressure so no dust escapes. Workers primarily use vacuum cleaners with special filters and disposable cloths to wipe the area clean of asbestos. Fried said his company hires an independent laboratory to test the work area for asbestos before and after the cleanup. In addition, the building owners as well as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration conduct their own tests to verify results. Workers are supposed to wear sealed suits and respirators and get decontaminated before exiting the work area.

The abatement workers' progress, like that of the rescue workers, has been occasionally hampered by the threat of collapsing buildings and shifting debris, said David Roscow, spokesman for Laborers' International Union of North America, the umbrella organization of the local unions.

"For some, it's a situation they've never been in," Roscow said from Las Vegas, where the union is holding a convention.

Whitman said the EPA has also been monitoring the harbor water and drinking water for lead and industrial contaminants, but no pollutants have been detected.

In the future, she said, samples will probably also be taken from the tunnels, such as the Holland and Battery, through which debris has



Angelo Campos uses an industrial vacuum cleaner to clear dust and ash from Pearl Street in lower Manhattan. EPA head Christine Todd Whitman

AP Photo

W53 10/19/01

The EPA Comes Clean on Asbestos

Available


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 Selikoff, 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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