

Avaltroni, Robert

From: Gair, Brad [Brad.Gair@fema.gov]
Sent: Thursday, August 15, 2002 12:06 PM
To: 'Avaltroni, Robert'
Subject: EPA News on Indoor Cleanup

Bob,

More good press for our partners.

Details of EPA Cleanup Plan Draws Fire

Publication: Downtown Express

By: Sascha Brodsky

Date: August 14, 2002

The federal Environmental Protection Agency last week released an expanded plan to clean indoor apartments near ground zero nearly a year after the World Trade Center disaster.

The plan now includes some testing for dioxins and toxic metals in a sampling of Lower Manhattan apartments but is still coming under fire from critics.

The E.P.A. bowed to pressure from infuriated tenants around ground zero in May, promising to clean and test apartments for asbestos. The agency maintains there is no major health hazard in the area.

The E.P.A. had released a plan to clean homes south of Canal St. three months ago, asking residents to request a cleanup by Sept. 3. The cleanup is available to those who live south of Canal, Allen and Pike Sts. Businesses are not eligible for the federal cleanup.

The agency and many scientists have downplayed any health risk from the dust, saying tests have shown the asbestos did not reach hazardous levels.

But some critics are still calling the cleanup plan too little too late. They said that the plan should be more comprehensive in testing for a wide array of contaminants and go beyond the E.P.A.'s Canal St. boundary.

"We know there was not a wall at Canal St.," Dr. Marjorie J. Clarke, a scientist in residence at Lehman College in the Bronx, told a rally of scientists and residents outside the agency's Lower Manhattan headquarters last week.

Former Councilmember Kathryn Freed said at the rally that she has suffered from respiratory problems that she attributes to World Trade Center contaminants.

"To date, the majority of apartments near ground zero are still not cleaned," she said. "The E.P.A. has put the onus on us on individuals to know how to clean up these apartments. Somehow, we are supposed to be the experts"

But agency spokesperson Bonnie Bellow said that the E.P.A. will test select apartments for other contaminants such as heavy metals with an eye toward expanding the cleanup.

"We will take a look at the data and then we will have a much clearer idea at what is out there," she said. "If anything comes up we will make sure to follow up on it."

The agency plans to test 250 apartments for dioxins and toxic metals like lead and mercury. Those apartments will be randomly chosen from the approximately 3,600 apartments whose residents have requested asbestos cleaning and testing. An additional 1,000 apartments will be tested for asbestos at the residents' request and cleaned only if their levels exceed federal standards. If tests indicated dangerous levels of dioxins and toxic metals, the apartments would be cleaned and an expansion of tests and cleanups would be considered.

Bellow also said the agency may expand the cleanup boundaries beyond Canal St. if contamination is found in buildings beyond that cutoff point.

Protestors said that the E.P.A has not adequately informed the public of the cleanup program and that many residents would not know about it in time to sign up in time. A hotline for people concerned about contamination, (877) 796-5471, is open until Sept. 3. But Bellow said that the agency has mailed out over 38,000 fliers describing the program and would continue to advertise the program in the media. She also said the agency was considering extending the deadline for enrolling in the cleanup.

Of the approximately 38,000 eligible apartments, the agency has so far received about 3,000 requests for apartment cleanings and about 1,000 requests for tests, officials said.

The total cleanup bill, to be paid by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is not yet clear. But the cost of cleaning a single apartment could range from \$3,000 to \$8,000.

Last week, the agency gave its plan to city officials who will put contracts for the work out to bid. Eight contractors will perform the work, which could begin as soon as next month.

According to the plan, a cleaning crew would enter a residence and determine what level of cleanup is appropriate according to the amount of dust and other debris. Contractors will use special vacuums to clean floors, walls, furniture and even books for tiny particles. Workers also will wipe down apartments by hand.

Once the cleanup is complete, the resident could determine how aggressive the follow-up testing should be. Those residents who request the most aggressive asbestos testing - in which a 1-horsepower leaf blower will stir up any remaining dust - must leave their apartments for 48 hours. Housing assistance will be available through the Red Cross.

Some environmental advocates have asked for testing to be conducted before the cleanup as well as afterward, concerned about the accuracy of a visual inspection. Some critics have also called for all apartments below Canal St. to be cleaned on a mandatory basis because of fears that one contaminated apartment could cross-contaminate a cleaned apartment.

EPA Must Come Clean on Cleanup Questions

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The Environmental Protection Agency can't have it both ways.

In an interview last week with Downtown Express, agency officials said that the cleanup plan for indoor spaces near ground zero-that will begin nearly a year after the disaster-is mostly intended to reassure the public.

But they also say there are remote but real health risks associated with the debris strewn by the World Trade Center—particularly from asbestos.

So what gives?

Either there is no health risk and the cleanup plan will be a multi-million dollar pacifier or the agency should be chastised for not moving a lot quicker.

Critics such as Rep. Jerrold Nadler and a small but vocal group of residents are right in asking why it has taken the E.P.A. so long to come up with a plan to clean up apartment interiors near ground zero.

Officials responded to such criticism last week in off the record comments by saying that the agency was overwhelmed by the task of monitoring the outdoor air following the disaster, and that the E.P.A. was not called in by the city to do the indoor cleanup until many months after the disaster.

It's hard to believe that the richest nation on earth couldn't afford to come up with the resources to get the indoor cleanup plan moving faster.

But it is true that the city under the administration of Mayor Rudy Giuliani was too quiet when it came to the environmental concerns. When the E.P.A. said it was up to the city to make sure apartments were clean, Giuliani should have either said the city does not have the wherewithal to do that in the face of the recovery efforts, or he should have taken on the responsibility. Instead he left it to residents to trust their landlords, or themselves, to do the right thing. This policy continued for many months into the Bloomberg administration.

Critics of the indoor cleanup plan have a litany of other complaints. They want the plan to be expanded beyond the Canal St. boundaries and include contaminants other than asbestos in all, not just a sample of apartments.

More controversially, some critics want the agency to force all residents near ground zero to have their apartments decontaminated under the theory that one unclean apartment could lead to cross-contamination. This smacks of hysteria and begs the question of whether the agency has the legal authority to clean someone's apartment without his or her consent.

Many people are not participating in the program, but that may turn out to be a good thing. If all but a handful of apartments are shown to be free of dangerous chemicals, then we the taxpayers will have saved millions of dollars by not cleaning and testing clean apartments. If many apartments test unsafe, however, then the E.P.A. can launch an aggressive education campaign to get more residents to agree to a professional cleaning.

The agency has worked to address some of the criticisms. The cleanup will spot check for contaminants other than asbestos. But we think it makes sense to test a sample of apartments between 14th and Canal Sts, which is not presently planned, as it can be done at a modest cost and will assuage some of the criticism.

But the public deserves a clear message from E.P.A. on just why it has taken a year for the indoor cleanup plan to begin and what it will do in the future to ensure such a mistake is not made again. The agency is in charge of protecting the nation's environment and if local officials are unable or unwilling to solve the problems of the next incident which causes environmental uncertainty, then it is up to the E.P.A. to take a more forceful role to advocate for, and protect, the public.

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