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Few of Those Eligible Register for Cleanup Help Near 9/11 Site

By KIRK JOHNSON

WASHINGTON, Sept. 24 — With just a week left to sign up, only about a quarter of the New York City residents eligible to have their apartments tested and cleaned to remove leftover World Trade Center dust have registered, federal environmental officials said today.

They said that many residents perhaps deemed the cleanup unnecessary, and that some might have been discouraged by reports of fraudulent cleanup contractors posing as government representatives.

But the biggest problem may be that many people still do not know that the offer even exists. The first free cleanup and air-sampling work with contractors in the field started on Sept. 12, two months behind schedule.

"One of the things we're finding is that when we go in to clean up, other people see us in the building cleaning up and then come forward," said the Environmental Protection Agency's administrator, Christie Whitman, in testifying before the Senate's Committee on Environment and Public Works about her agency's response to the terrorist attack. Mrs. Whitman told the panel that she was interested in pushing the sign-up period — which was already extended once, by 30 days — past the Oct. 3 deadline. But because of the complex chain of responsibility over indoor air, she said, the decision would have to be approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is paying for the cleanups, and the City of New York.

A spokesman for FEMA said that the agency would go along with any decision to extend the sign-up period if city officials decided that more time was necessary.

The commissioner of the city's Department of Environmental Protection, Christopher O. Ward, noted that calls to the E.P.A.'s hot line were declining, but that the city was committed to seeking full participation in the cleanup program. He said that the city would discuss with FEMA the possibility of expanding the cleanup program to include businesses.

About 20,000 apartments south of Canal, Allen and Pike Streets in Lower Manhattan are covered by the plan.

Residents may register by calling the E.P.A. at (877) 796-5471 or by signing on to www.epa.gov/wtc.

In signing up, residents are given two options: for a cleaning and testing, or a testing only.

As of today, 3,633 residents have registered for a clean-and-test, and 1,031 for a testing only, said a spokesman for the E.P.A. Most of the apartments are to be tested only for asbestos, but 250 of those initial apartments will also receive a broader spectrum of tests for dioxins, heavy metals and other pollutants under a separate pilot program.

The Environmental Protection Agency spokesman, Richard Stapleton, said that a decision on whether to expand the testing menu would be made on the basis of those initial 250 apartments, but that results were not yet available. Of the 80 asbestos-only apartment tests so far, he said, 2 contained asbestos in levels that suggested a need for further cleanup.