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Landfill parking lot for automobiles with undetermined fate

■ Hundreds of vehicles generally unscathed by WTC attacks could still be destroyed as health precaution

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The Fresh Kills landfill has become a giant parking lot for hundreds of cars — including luxury SUVs, Jaguars and Mercedes — which are about to be declared contaminated and will possibly be destroyed.

The unlucky vehicles were parked in Lower Manhattan on Sept. 11 and covered with dust and debris, including, health officials worry, particles of asbestos that made their way deep into the crevices of the engines.

As a result, city Health Commissioner Dr. Neal Cohen yesterday said it would be too expensive and impractical to try decontaminating the cars. But there doesn't yet appear to be a plan for disposing of them.

"I'll do whatever I can in my authority to recommend to the mayor that they be condemned," he said. "There is asbestos debris and other pollutants and contaminants and particulates covering them all . . . and it makes no sense at this point . . . to try to salvage them and do the necessary cleanup."

Police dragged 900 cars to the landfill after the Twin Towers collapsed, said Dr. Cohen. Working with the FBI, they sorted them into two piles — salvageable and worthless, said a Sanitation Department official.

More than half of the cars were deemed unsalvageable and were stacked on top of each other, the official estimated — including ambulances, police cars and a Pepsi truck that were flattened by the falling cement and steel.

"Some of them, you can't even tell they're cars," he said.

The remaining vehicles, some intact but covered with dust, are parked at the landfill as owners await their fate.

From there, it's unclear what will happen. Dr. Cohen's recommendation to condemn the vehicles without trying to decontaminate them will be "instrumental in what gets done," said his spokeswoman, Sandra Mullin. "From a health standpoint, he does have the authority to make something stick."

It's unclear whether the city could or would pile contaminated material into the landfill, and the Sanitation official said no decision has been made about how to handle the vehicles. Several agencies, including Health and Sanitation, would probably work together to come up with a solution, Ms. Mullin said.

The usual way of dealing with hazardous material is to hire a contractor to take it to an appropriate storage site, the Sanitation official said, but he was unsure whether "contaminated" rises to the level of a hazardous material.

Cars are not normally buried at Fresh Kills in any case, he said. They can be stripped down and sold for scrap metal, but not if they're contaminated — and especially not in the case of fire trucks and police cars, which evoke powerful emotions.

"This thing has to be handled correctly, in the most sensitive manner," the official said. "It's not like there's a manual for this."

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