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EPA report buries a revelation

Emission of dioxins in and around Ground Zero in the two months following the World Trade Center collapse were "likely the highest ambient concentrations that have ever been reported," according to a report released last week by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

This revelation is buried on page 77 of a 160-page report that the agency released last week.

The report is titled "Exposure and Human Health Evaluation of Airborne Pollution from the World Trade Center Disaster" and was authored by the EPA Office of Research and Development in Washington.

It is the most comprehensive study on pollution in and around Ground Zero. The report, dated October 2002, was not released until Friday, between the Christmas and New Year's holidays, when it was unlikely to get much media attention.

Asked about the unusual timing, an EPA spokeswoman in Washington said: "This is a draft report. We really weren't trying to slide it under the door. The sooner the draft is released the more time there will be for public comment."

EPA's press release and the media coverage over the weekend have focused on the report's most comforting conclusion - that most neighborhood people and office workers who returned to their homes and jobs after Sept. 17 were "unlikely to suffer short-term or adverse health effects" from contaminants in the air.

But the report also says that thousands of people who were caught in the huge dust clouds on Sept. 11, or who inhaled the air around Ground Zero in the first few days afterward, were "at risk for immediate acute [and possibly chronic] respiratory and other

types of symptoms."

No immediate sampling

Health officials have no way of telling how toxic those initial clouds were, the report says, because major sampling of the Ground Zero environment did not begin for some toxics until Sept. 14 and for others until Sept. 23.

As for dioxin, a product of uncontrolled combustion, unprecedented levels were even found several blocks beyond Ground Zero, in areas that were reopened to the public one week after the attack.

At a monitoring station on Park Row near City Hall Park, for instance, dioxin levels between Oct. 12 and 29 averaged 5.6 parts per trillion/per cubic meter of air, or nearly six times the highest dioxin level ever recorded in the U.S., according to the report.

Dioxin levels at the Ground Zero rubble pile itself were much higher. According to the report, "from the first measurement day of Sept. 23 through Nov. 21, [levels] show unambiguous elevation, with concentrations ranging from about 10 to 170" parts per trillion.

That, says the report, is "between 100 and 1,500 times higher than typically found in urban air."

EPA scientists who wrote the report concluded that there was "minimal concern" for excess cancers because the high levels only lasted about two months and because dioxin exposure is usually associated with ingesting dioxin-contaminated food rather than inhalation.

But not all public health experts agree.

"Those air levels are outrageous," said Dr. David Carpenter one of the nation's top dioxin specialists and former dean of the School of Public Health at State University of New York at Albany. "There's a very significant health danger here."

Others who have reviewed the report criticize its emphasis on sampling for toxics in outdoor air.

"They're assuming that residents would be walking in the general

ambient air and never disturbing settled dust," said Carrie Loewenherz of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, a labor union health group.

According to Lowenherz, a comprehensive study should include data on indoor air tests and on contaminant levels in settled dust.

The EPA report acknowledges that "evaluating the indoor environment in more depth" is one of several future areas of study.

"EPA's Region 2 office is continuing studies of indoor air," said Washington-based EPA spokeswoman Suzanne Ackerman. "It was more a question of priorities, and the outdoor air was what people were most concerned about at first."

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