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## WTC air fit to breathe? No

Assurances can't be trusted

**Point/Counterpoint**

By REP. JERROLD NADLER

Sure, the air at Ground Zero after 9/11 was safe to breathe, if we believe the Environmental Protection Agency. But how can we believe an EPA that pronounced the air safe in September 2001, before it possessed comprehensive outdoor test results or conducted a single indoor test? Sure, it was safe, if we believe the White House, which instructed the EPA to doctor press releases and issue false reassurances. The EPA inspector general's report gives New Yorkers many reasons to mistrust government and be justifiably concerned that our air wasn't, and may still not be, safe.

The agency misled us in other ways. Despite its repeated mischaracterizations that "thousands" of outdoor test results were "below risk-level" (a standard that EPA Inspector General Nikki Tinsley says wasn't health-based), Energy Department tests conducted a mile north of Ground Zero in October 2001 found the amount of pulverized particulate matter "unprecedented." The Los Angeles Times reported that those tests found 9/11 contamination "outdid even the worst pollution from the Kuwait oil fields fires." A U.S. Geological Survey study conducted in September 2001 found that pH levels in the dust were "as corrosive as drain cleaner." EPA officials didn't release this information until we shamed them into it at a Senate hearing Feb. 11, 2002.

There is little doubt that those caught in the plume and rescue workers laboring for weeks without respirators were exposed to a toxic cocktail. Thousands are already sick.

Most New Yorkers don't know that the agency passed the buck to the city on indoor air. The city, in turn, left indoor air testing and cleanup to building owners and tenants. The city did almost no oversight and advised people to use inadequate cleaning methods. Furthermore, when I gave EPA officials privately commissioned test results with findings of high toxicity inside downtown apartments, they ignored them.

handle the cleanup alone, it initiated its so-called Cleanup Program. The inspector general said this program "does not meet the minimum criteria for protecting human health the EPA established." The inspector general found it flawed because it tested for only one toxin, used subpar testing methods, was prone to cause recontamination and was geographically too limited. Only 4,000 of the roughly 20,000 apartments downtown have received even this shoddy cleanup. The program did nothing for workplaces or schools. We have no idea how many of the nearly 1,900 buildings downtown can be considered properly decontaminated.

As a result, the public health remains at risk.

So, was the air safe? Is it now? We still don't know, because we've been lied to. We cannot believe the Bush administration until it carries out its September 2001 pledge to "spare no expense" to protect New Yorkers' environment and implement a proper testing and cleanup program that meets federal legal standards.

**Nadler, a Democrat, represents  
New York's 8th Congressional District.**

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