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NEWS ANALYSIS

Uncertainty Lingers Over 9/11 Air Pollution

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

The air in Lower Manhattan after Sept. 11 has swirled back into the news — what people knew about it, when they knew it and what they said about it.

A report by the federal Environmental Protection Agency's inspector general lambasted the agency's former administrator, Christie Whitman, for her reassuring statements about the air quality after 9/11. Those comments, investigators said, could not possibly have been based on scientific fact. Mrs. Whitman has strongly defended herself, saying she spoke only what was known at the time.

But the underlying issue, researchers, doctors and politicians say, remains just as unresolved today as it was back then in the chaotic, emotional days after the attacks: How do you communicate something about which no one has ever had any experience? Was there a standard of confidence about the environmental risks and unknowns that was scientifically or perhaps even morally appropriate under the circumstances?

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In an interview on Friday, Mrs. Whitman, who left the agency in June, said that on Sept. 18, 2001, when she announced that the air in Lower Manhattan was "safe to breathe," the statement was correct. Outside the smoldering pit of ground zero, she said, the pollutants that the agency was measuring had dropped to near-normal levels. But she said she also believed that New Yorkers — anxious, terrified and in a real way lost at that moment — simply would not have stood for a cold or vaguely worded scientific response.

"They're now saying we didn't have enough information," she said. "But when people are really upset, you can't win. You've got to say something, and what we communicated was what we knew. There may be long-term health implications we never could have conceived of, but we couldn't stop and stay, 'We can't tell you for 10 years.' That absolutely wouldn't work."

Many researchers say they believe that whatever the intentions, Mrs. Whitman's confident words did have implications for how New Yorkers perceived the environmental risks and how they viewed the government's overall response to the disaster.

"There were uncertainties, and in those situations, you should say, one, you don't know, and two, you'll find out," said Dr. Stephen M. Levin, the medical director of the Irving J. Selikoff Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "And then you make statements based on real data."

Dr. Levin, whose center has examined about 6,000 people exposed to trade center debris, said he thought some companies used Mrs. Whitman's comments to justify ordering their employers back to work downtown even as the dust and smoke swirled, and some of those workers, he

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said, became his patients. He says some ground zero workers who developed lung problems also may have given themselves "permission" not to use respirators because of her words, even though the final responsibility was their own.

Other health experts say it is not as simple as science and numbers. There was an anxious emotional pitch in New York in those hours, they say — a hunger for certainty and confidence that things would be all right. Whether it was politics, economics or simple human nature at work, the momentum, they say, was hard to resist.

"There was a tremendous pressure to act like people could move back into their homes, schools and Wall Street," said Professor David Rosner, the director of the Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health at Columbia University. "We wanted the city to be normal again."

Other scientists who were involved from the earliest days in testing the air downtown say that Mrs. Whitman's statements were, in a way, right and wrong at the same time. The cumulative evidence through the months of independent testing by academic researchers and private companies ultimately supported what she had said. But at the time, they say, she could not have known that they would.

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