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## Energy & Environment

# Setting the Record Straight: The White House, 9/11, and Air Quality

by Michael Catanzaro  
Posted Oct 2, 2003



Those seeking a rational, fact-based treatment of the EPA response to the World Trade Center collapse surely won't get it by reading Susan Moeller's op-ed in the September 25 edition of *Newsday*. Moeller, who teaches media and international affairs at the University of Maryland, writes of a "scandal" and "deliberate manipulation" on the part of the White House.

Nonsense. A reasonable examination of the available evidence wholly undermines Moeller's assertions. Moreover, contrast Moeller's views with, of all sources, the New York *Times* editorial page, which dismissed the entire issue as "retrospective nitpicking." The *Times*, no friend of the Bush Administration, also agrees with the most recent scientific findings about air quality since September 11: "The broader public faced little or no risk from breathing the outdoor air once the initial cloud settled."

Below, Moeller's claims are closely measured against the EPA IG report's findings and other relevant sources. Not surprisingly, Moeller's claims ring just a bit hollow:

**MOELLER:** The recent report by the inspector general of the Environmental Protection Agency should by all rights have New Yorkers - and others concerned about whether their government is capable of lying about public health and safety - out in the streets. Yet the report has not generated the media coverage and public attention it deserves.

Why? Certainly the allegations in the report are scandalous: They detail the White House's deliberate manipulation of the information that was released about the air quality in Manhattan and Brooklyn in the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center. "The White House Council on Environmental Quality," said the report, "influenced ... the information that EPA communicated to the public through its early press releases when it convinced the EPA to add reassuring statements and delete cautionary ones."

**FACT:** For starters, Moeller's conflation of the words "deliberate manipulation" and "influence" is brazenly misleading. Obviously, the words "manipulate" and "influence" have quite different meanings. It's no shock or scandal that CEQ coordinated, at the request of the President, the multi-agency task force (including EPA and OSHA) that organized the response effort. Put simply, CEQ had a statutory duty to participate in the planning. It's ludicrous to suggest that CEQ should not have played any role.

Manipulation (especially of the deliberate kind) implies something sinister, as the definition suggests: to tamper with or falsify for personal gain. Moeller

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probably should have watched the September 4 NBC interview with EPA IG Nikki Tinsley. According to reporter Lisa Myers, Tinsley "stopped short of accusing anyone of lying or of knowingly providing false information." Or she could have read the IG report: "In regard to the monitoring data, we found no evidence that EPA attempted to conceal data results from the public." Further, EPA IG staff told aides from the Senate EPW Committee that there was no conspiracy or attempt to suppress information.

The Senate EPW report on the EPA IG investigation also addressed directly the supposed "scandal" of the press releases EPA sent out in the days after September 11. "When asked to compare the statements in the final press releases to those in the draft releases," the report states, "the OSHA official questioned by EPW staff in every instance believed the changed or added language more clearly communicated the real risks of asbestos exposure than the draft." Notably, the only existing asbestos standard that was applicable to ground zero was an OSHA standard.

**MOELLER:** But the story about the administration's distorting the health risks for those living and working near Ground Zero is remaining, at best, on the inside pages of the newspapers.

**FACT:** Distorted the health risks? Again, actually reading the report before drawing conclusions about "scandals" is very important (presuming one actually cares about the facts). As the EPA IG stated: "[The IG] spoke to a number of experts in the field of environmental monitoring, including physicians, industrial hygienists, and researchers. These experts generally agreed that the levels of airborne asbestos detected in the air outside the perimeter of Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan did not present a significant increase in long-term risk to the public."

Subsequent research by scientists from the University of California has confirmed these findings. Reporting on that research, the *Times* wrote that, "most residents and workers downtown--while they may well have suffered from the dust at the collapse and periodic wafts from the smoke plume--were largely spared the prolonged exposure that usually raised the greatest health concerns."

*Mr. Catanzaro is Communications Director for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.*

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