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9/11 air assurances disputed

A draft report says EPA erred in saying breathing at Ground Zero was safe.

By Chris Bowman and Edie Lau -- Bee Staff Writers - (*Published March 16, 2003*)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's pollution tests in the smoke-filled days following the World Trade Center collapse did not support the agency's pronouncements that the air around Ground Zero was safe to breathe, an independent federal investigation has found.

Further, the EPA reached its conclusion using a cancer risk level 100 times greater than what it traditionally deems "acceptable" for public exposure to toxic air contaminants, according to the EPA's Office of Inspector General.

The "preliminary conclusions," contained in an internal OIG document obtained by The Bee reinforce the views of many doctors and public health advocates involved in the medical evaluations of thousands of firefighters, volunteers, demolition workers and immigrant laborers who toiled in the thick of the dust, smoke and fumes.

"To say that it's safe, which suggests no risk -- we just knew that was wrong," said Jonathan Bennett, spokesman for the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, a labor union advocacy group, which had doctors in a roving van seeing cleanup workers.

"The proof of this was in what you saw in the people in the van and in people being seen to this day at the Mount Sinai Medical Center," Bennett said.

More than half the Ground Zero workers screened by health experts nearly a year after the attacks continued to suffer from lung, ear, nose and throat problems, according to a study released in January by Mount Sinai, in New York.

The federally funded screening program so far has evaluated more than 3,500 of the estimated 40,000 workers directly involved in the rescue, recovery and cleanup.

EPA officials declined comment Friday, noting that the inspector general's investigation is still under way.

"It is inappropriate for the EPA to be commenting on a document that is not final and that is being done independently," said Lisa Harrison, the agency's press secretary.

The preliminary findings by the EPA's Office of Inspector General are the latest in a series of criticisms that doctors, scientists and politicians have leveled against the EPA over its response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the twin towers.

The EPA's ombudsman at the time, Robert Martin, said in testimony last year before a Senate subcommittee that the EPA "has provided erroneous information to the public" and has "not used the best available technology to measure asbestos levels."

Martin later resigned in protest, saying EPA Administrator Christie Whitman moved to silence him. Whitman denies the charge.

A U.S. Geological Survey team found shortly after the attacks that some dust from the site was as caustic as drain cleaner because of the high concentration of pulverized cement, an alkaline substance. The team's conclusion, revealed by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch newspaper, had been sent to the EPA and other government agencies, but none made the finding public.

And, in February last year, scientists at the University of California, Davis, reported that dust and fumes from the smoldering rubble exposed lower Manhattan residents to some of the highest levels of air pollution ever recorded.

A study published last fall in the New England Journal of Medicine reported that 332, or 3.3 percent, of the 9,914 New York City firefighters on the scene in the week after Sept. 11 developed "World Trade Center cough," a severe and persistent hacking.

"Within 24 hours after exposure, all 332 firefighters with World Trade Center cough reported having a productive cough; the sputum was usually black to grayish and infiltrated with 'pebbles or particles,' " the article states.

Dr. Ghulam Saydain, a pulmonologist at Nassau University Medical Center on Long Island, said some of the more than 600 patients -- mainly firefighters and police -- seen at the center's Ground Zero clinic developed "significant" respiratory disease.

"Many of them are getting better, and some of them, even after -- it's been more than 1 1/2 years now -- still have symptoms," Saydain said.

Thomas Cahill, a physicist and international authority on air pollution who led the UCD study, said his laboratory analyses of air samples showed that the towers' collapse spewed enormous amounts of potentially lethal, extremely tiny particles of crushed and incinerated computers, glass, furniture and other building debris unrecognized by the EPA's air monitoring.

"The EPA made a series of rather ordinary measurements and made pronouncements that were not supported by the facts," Cahill said last week upon learning of the OIG report.

The OIG has been investigating the EPA's handling of the World Trade Center fallout for more than a year, a spokeswoman said.

Though connected to the EPA, the agency has no authority over the inspection teams. The OIG acts as a public watchdog, investigating allegations of agency fraud, abuse and negligence. It reports to Congress.

The document obtained by The Bee is an internal OIG "status report" on the World Trade Center investigation. The report summarizes investigators' "preliminary conclusions" to date, based on interviews and document reviews, and outlines work in progress.

An OIG spokeswoman confirmed the report is accurate as of its date -- Jan. 27 -- but cautioned that the findings cited could change before publication, which is expected in mid-May.

"The information on there is not solid because our work is not concluded yet," said Eileen McMahon, an OIG spokeswoman.

A chief objective of the investigation is to determine whether air pollution monitoring data from the collapse site and in the surrounding New York financial district support what EPA told the public about the health risks.

Whitman, the agency administrator, made repeated assurances in the first few weeks after Sept. 11 that the air around the wreckage largely was safe to breathe.

"Given the scope of the tragedy ... I am glad to reassure the people of New York and Washington, D.C., that the air is safe to breathe, and their water is safe to drink," Whitman announced one week after the terrorist strikes.

In the January status report to Office of Inspector General managers, a team of six investigators said that it had concluded Whitman's declarations were premature.

"EPA did not have sufficient data to declare the ambient (outside) air 'safe to breathe' when it did," the report states.

The report cites several reasons:

- * The EPA had data on only four of 14 pollutants that scientists believe the public potentially was exposed to immediately after the collapse of the twin towers.
- * The criterion the EPA used to conclude asbestos levels were safe is not health-based. Rather, it is a crude standard applied to schools that have undergone asbestos removal, to make sure contractors made no major mistakes.
- * The EPA's pronouncements did not address short-term health impacts.
- * The agency's air quality standards are not applicable to this kind of pollution event: enormous clouds of finely pulverized glass, concrete and gypsum and a superheated pile of rubble that spewed ultrafine particles and poisons into the air for weeks.

"Health standards do not exist for (the) cumulative impact of exposure to several pollutants at once or the synergistic impact of air toxins unknown and little studied," the report states.

Also, the inspection team said it learned that the EPA applied a dramatically higher level of "acceptable risk" in making its pronouncements.

"EPA's conclusion that the air was safe is based on a one in 10,000 risk that someone will develop cancer from exposure to the WTC (World Trade Center) pollutants, and this was only for a limited set of POCs (pollutants of concern)," the report states.

For exposure to air toxins, the EPA traditionally has defined the acceptable cancer odds as a one in 1 million, for the general public. Its regulation of occupational exposures are based on risk levels no greater than 1 in 100,000.

The OIG also is focused on the role the White House played in drafting the EPA's press releases on the fallout of the World Trade Center collapse.

A former EPA chief of staff "acknowledged that the content of the WTC press releases was heavily influenced by (President Bush's) Council on Environmental Quality," the OIG report states.

"Selected e-mails indicate CEQ dictated (to the EPA public information office) the content of early press releases -- 100 percent of what CEQ added was added; 100 percent of what CEQ deleted was deleted," the report states.

The report does not say whether the EPA objected to the changes. Spokeswomen for the

council and the EPA said it is not unusual for the White House to be involved in the drafting of public statements, especially on high-profile issues.

While the EPA declined comment on the ongoing investigation, Whitman has strongly defended the agency against other critics of its response to the New York City disaster.

She has pointed out that the EPA began monitoring the air in lower Manhattan within hours of the collapse and that many EPA officials provided scientific, engineering, public health and management expertise.

One scientist who was on the scene of the disaster said it is difficult to criticize the agency's decisions given the enormity of the job responding to the chaos.

"I don't think I would have done any better or any worse," said Paul Liroy, an environmental health scientist affiliated with Rutgers University and the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey.

"We were just going from one place to another, one moment to another, trying to gather your wits in an event that shook the nation," Liroy said.

"This was a horrible learning experience."

About the Writer

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