

FEMA covered up toxic danger in trailers given to Katrina victims

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The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) systematically suppressed reports of high toxicity levels in trailers provided to victims of Hurricane Katrina, according to the findings of a congressional committee hearing Thursday.

Henry Waxman, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, concluded that FEMA deliberately neglected to investigate reports of high formaldehyde levels in the trailers so as “to bolster the agency’s litigation position” in case people affected by its negligence were to sue.

The hearing coincided with the release of 5,000 pages of documents implicating FEMA in a protracted and systematic cover-up dating from the first deployment of the trailers in May of 2006.

FEMA delivered 120,000 trailers to victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita throughout the Gulf Coast in 2006. In March of that year, the agency began receiving complaints of formaldehyde odors and possible health problems arising from exposure, at which point the agency dispatched a worker to test gas levels. The investigation discovered formaldehyde levels 75 times greater than the maximum safe threshold for workplaces. In fact, according to an internal agency email, the “tester himself developed eye-watering symptoms of exposure.” Despite the findings, FEMA released a statement concluding that it had “evaluated the small number of cases where odors of Formaldehyde have been reported and we are confident that there is no ongoing risk.”

In response to persistent complaints from trailer residents, the Sierra Club initiated its own investigation in May. The environmental group found that 30 out of 32 trailers tested had formaldehyde concentrations significantly in excess of safe levels. At the time, Mary DeVany, a certified industrial hygienist working with

the Sierra Club stated, “almost all of the concentrations that we measured were 10 to 100 times higher than the worst smog levels in Los Angeles.”

Upon learning of the formaldehyde contamination, FEMA field staff sought to investigate, but were restrained by officials higher up. On June 15, a FEMA lawyer wrote: “Do not initiate any testing until we give the OK ... Once you get results and should they indicate some problem, the clock is running on our duty to respond to them.” The next day, a FEMA staffer wrote that the agency’s legal office “has advised that we do not do testing, which would imply FEMA’s ownership of this issue.”

Later that month, a man was found dead in his trailer after having complained about formaldehyde fumes. In reference to the case, one of the released emails noted, “We do not have autopsy results yet, but he had apparently told his neighbor in the past that he was afraid to use his A.C. because he thought it would make the formaldehyde worse.”

According to the documents, six agencies staged a conference call in relation to the death, calling for a serious investigation into toxin levels. FEMA explicitly rejected the proposal, and one of the agency lawyers claimed that perusing an investigation “could seriously undermine the Agency’s position” in case of lawsuits brought against it. For the next few months FEMA took the lawyer’s advice and sought to stonewall any systematic investigation into the problem.

Paul Stewart, a former army officer, testified before the committee. He noted that smoke detectors in his trailer would go off for no reason, most likely due to high formaldehyde concentrations. He also observed that it was common to see other FEMA trailers with their smoke detector batteries removed. He and his wife experienced nosebleeds and respiratory disorders while

living in their trailer, even after keeping the windows open and air conditioner on for weeks.

Hundreds of people have thus far complained about formaldehyde levels in their trailers, and those who testified before the congressional hearing described experiencing nosebleeds, respiratory problems, as well as mouth and nasal tumors. Formaldehyde is a known carcinogen, and prolonged exposure has been correlated to increased risk of bronchitis, asthma, and allergies. Some 76,000 households displaced by Hurricane Katrina continue to use the affected trailers.

Formaldehyde is a component of many glues, plastics, and building materials, particularly particleboard. It is released into the atmosphere at a greater rate in hot and humid conditions similar to those prevalent in the Gulf Coast where the trailers were deployed.

In response to the growing criticism, FEMA conducted a new set of tests last fall, but only on trailers that had been left with their windows open and air conditioners running for weeks. Despite this, formaldehyde levels were found to be .3 parts per billion, 400 times the normal limit for continuous exposure set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. FEMA regardless concluded that the trailers were perfectly safe.

This is only the latest in the long list of criminally negligent actions by FEMA towards the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The agency—which operates under the aegis of the Bush administration's Department of Homeland Security—made no serious preparations for the long-predicted disaster and then failed to evacuate tens of thousands of people trapped in New Orleans during the storm, during the course of which nearly 2,000 people died and hundreds of thousands lost everything.

In the storm's aftermath FEMA officials blocked any effective relief and re-building effort, in particular to the poorer areas of the city and the Gulf Coast, while channeling money to contractors with political connections to the Bush administration.

As the second anniversary of the hurricane approaches, tens of thousands of residents remain displaced and one of America's most important cities continues to remain a disaster area.



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