

# US: FEMA trailers caused at least 17,000 illnesses among Katrina survivors

Naomi Spencer  
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Approaching three years since the devastation of the US Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina, a public health nightmare continues for thousands of survivors who were housed in government-supplied trailers.

Many of the 300,000 residents who were relocated into housing provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have developed serious respiratory problems because of excessive levels of the industrial chemical and known carcinogen formaldehyde, according to a report by Spencer Hsu published May 25 in the *Washington Post*.

Some of the most seriously affected are infants and children, who have developed chronic asthma and require lifelong medical care. The cancer rates will not be known for at least a decade, according to health experts.

While workplace exposure levels are regulated and the health risks associated with high levels are well known, there are no federal regulations on the level of formaldehyde in building materials. The chemical is emitted from glues and sealants used in construction materials such as particleboard, plywood, paneling, and laminated surfaces common in low-end housing units. Formaldehyde is released at the highest levels during warm weather and from newly constructed units.

The *Washington Post* noted that tests of many FEMA trailers revealed formaldehyde levels drastically exceeding the Environmental Protection Agency and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) 15-minute workplace exposure limit of 100 parts per billion. This is the limit at which serious adverse health symptoms begin to appear, and California state health regulators estimate long-term exposure at this level raises cancer risk by 50 cases per 100,000.

More than four in five FEMA trailers tested by the environmental group the Sierra Club exceeded this limit in 2006. Sierra Club testers said formaldehyde concentrations were between 10 and 100 times higher in the trailers than in the worst smog conditions in Los Angeles.

The Sierra Club conducted another round of tests in April

2007 and found formaldehyde concentrations of more than 100 parts per billion in fully 96 percent of FEMA trailers. FEMA dismissed these tests and took counter-samples for its own tests from unoccupied trailers that were aired out for days in advance.

Testing by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found levels exceeding 100 parts per billion in 41 percent of the units it had tested in December and January; the average level was 77 parts per billion, and as high as 590 ppb. The CDC warned that because of the cold weather the results understated levels.

Citing chronic breathing disorders, dozens of deaths, mouth and nasal tumors, and cases of cancer, 17,000 Katrina survivors filed a class-action lawsuit against the federal government and 64 manufacturers of the emergency housing units. Many of the plaintiffs in the present case, victims of government negligence on multiple levels, were among those who unsuccessfully filed claims against the federal Army Corps of Engineers over the levee failures that resulted in the catastrophic flooding of New Orleans.

In the past month, FEMA has moved to vacate all the remaining trailers. On June 1 the agency sent out deadline notices for the 24,600 residents still living in emergency units without proposing housing alternatives.

The problems with the trailers were long known by the federal government. Residents in the trailer park camps set up throughout Louisiana and Mississippi filed complaints over severe headaches, nosebleeds, and breathing difficulties in the months after they were relocated, but FEMA declined to systematically test the units.

After one resident, a pregnant mother with a young infant, complained repeatedly of conditions in her trailer, FEMA found formaldehyde levels 75 times the NIOSH maximum workplace exposure level. Yet, the agency did not widen its investigation or even issue a public advisory about the problem. In fact, FEMA continued auctioning off thousands of unoccupied emergency trailers on the commercial housing market, and systematically suppressed findings of toxicity in anticipation of litigation.

FEMA ordered the trailers for some \$2.7 billion dollars as Katrina approached the Gulf Coast in 2005. At the time, manufacturers were hastily given specifications, which the *Post* said were spelled out in just 25 lines with little stipulation for safety standards. FEMA bought 54,000 trailers and mobile homes using a single page of specifications for \$1.4 billion. According to the paper, the agency paid another billion dollars to produce 76,800 trailers with eight pages of specifications, but again there was no mention of formaldehyde, and very limited safety standards.

Joseph Hagerman, a scientist with the Federation of American Scientists involved in a government project to develop new emergency housing, commented to the paper: “I still can’t believe that we bought a billion dollars’ worth of product with a 25-line spec. There’s not much you can do in 25 lines to protect life safety. There’s over 20,000 parts in these homes.”

Two companies responsible for producing tens of thousands of trailers for FEMA, Fleetwood and Gulf Stream, have insisted they used only “higher-quality, low-emitting wood products.” The *Washington Post* quoted a letter to congressional investigators from lawyers from Gulf Stream saying the company “mostly met a ‘longstanding policy’ to buy components that comply with mobile home standards, but it acknowledged exceptions” and that Gulf Stream “did not conduct any testing on components or parts.”

Manufacturers of trailer components suggested that unregulated Chinese imports, some of which was said to reek of formaldehyde, were to blame. According to the Hardwood Plywood & Veneer Association, the North American market share of Chinese imports ballooned from 4 to 40 percent since 2001 because of the housing construction boom in the US.

Robert Feldman, a spokesperson for the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association—the trailer manufacturers’ trade group—absurdly suggested to the *Post* that formaldehyde levels in the trailers had nothing to do with illness among the evacuee population occupying them, and that more likely aggravators were “mold, Katrina-related chemical spills, smoking or local climate factors.” “There may be a rush to conclude formaldehyde is the issue when in fact the results seem to suggest the answer is a little more complex,” he said.

In a seemingly unwitting acknowledgment of the dangers of prolonged formaldehyde exposure and its ubiquitous presence in mobile home fabrication, a spokeswoman for Fleetwood commented to the paper, “You know, when something hasn’t been a problem, you often don’t suddenly consider that it will be. I don’t believe that anybody expected these people to stay in the trailers as long as people have stayed in them.”

The vague government specifications were for all intents and purposes a blank check for the industry to produce units without regard to human health. There can be little doubt that after receiving government orders, manufacturers sped up production and widened their profit margins by using substandard materials and cutting corners on safety. But in a broader sense, the extremely high percentage of trailers found in tests to have excessive formaldehyde levels suggest that the toxicity in the FEMA units are less an industry exception than a rule.

Manufacturers of trailers are not held to many of the basic safety standards required of home manufacturers because they are classified as vehicles and, as the *Post* notes, the industry insists that they are not intended to be used for more than a few days at a time, a few times a year. In reality, however, millions of poor families buy or rent trailers around the country because they cannot afford anything safer or more durable.

In one sense, the public health catastrophe now unfolding among the post-Katrina population is a concentrated expression of the plight of the poorest sections of the working class throughout the country, who live in substandard housing, suffer higher exposure to pollutants and toxins in their home and work environments, develop cancer at higher rates, are rebuffed by the courts, refused compensation and medical aid for illnesses, and die younger of preventable ailments. In innumerable instances they are victims of industry and a government incapable and unwilling to regulate it.

As CDC toxicology assistant director Christopher De Rosa commented to the Associated Press May 27, “It’s tragic that when people most need the protection, they are actually going from one disaster to a health disaster that might be considered worse.”



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