

World Trade Center Response
Overview
September 23, 2003

The recent release of an EPA Inspector General's (IG) report on EPA's response to the World Trade Center collapse has generated national press coverage and commentary. A good deal of the coverage has been inaccurate, and many of the allegations are baseless. The following overview of EPA's actions in response to this catastrophic event may be helpful in answering questions from the press, the public, friends and family who may be confused by the characterization of EPA in recent press accounts.

- From the moment the buildings came down, EPA's first priority was the protection of people's health. Within minutes, Region 2 activated its emergency response personnel; as people fled, they came into the city from our New Jersey emergency operations center to monitor environmental conditions. Ultimately, hundreds of EPA employees were involved in the cleanup of Lower Manhattan and Ground Zero.
- Throughout, we used our best professional judgment – working hand-in-hand with environmental and health experts in the federal, state and city governments – to make decisions based on the information available at each point in time. The collaborating agencies included the Centers for Disease Control, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the New York State Departments of Health and Environmental Conservation, and the New York City Departments of Health, Environmental Protection and the Office of Emergency Management.
- Government agencies and independent experts agree that outdoor air quality has long since returned to pre-September 11 levels. More than 25,000 samples of close to 700 contaminants taken over nine months tell the true story of Lower Manhattan conditions.
- A study by EPA's Office of Research and Development, which is currently undergoing peer review, concluded that, "with the exception of those exposed immediately following the collapse and perhaps during the next few days, people in the surrounding community are not likely to suffer from serious long or short-term health effects." The IG's report acknowledges that independent experts "generally agreed that the levels of airborne asbestos detected outside the perimeter of Ground Zero...did not present a significant increase in long-term health risk to the public."
- We knew from the start that workers at Ground Zero faced drastically different conditions than the general public, and made every effort to urge them to wear respirators. Over the ensuing days, EPA worked with the state of New York to provide to the city with thousands of respirators, respirator cartridges, and other protective gear for distribution to rescue, recovery, and cleanup workers. The respirators provided by EPA were only a small part of the thousands of respirators supplied by OSHA and other agencies. EPA did not have the authority to require workers to wear this equipment; nevertheless, at daily on-site operations meetings we consistently spoke about the need for workers at Ground Zero to protect themselves, and supported the message

with flyers and posters. The importance of respiratory protection was reiterated again and again at worker wash stations established at the site, in press interviews and community meetings.

- We warned people in sensitive groups – those with respiratory problems or asthma – to seek medical attention if they were experiencing symptoms from the dust or ongoing fires. This message was included when Agency officials spoke to the media, addressed the public at countless community meetings, and testified at city, state and federal hearings on our response.
- Data from our indoor residential cleanup program – available to Lower Manhattan residents who had more than six months to register on-line or through a telephone hotline open seven days a week – tells an important story about indoor air quality. Only about one percent of the apartments in which we tested the air for asbestos had levels above our stringent health-based benchmarks.
- A study of cleaning techniques conducted in a heavily-impacted Lower Manhattan building, also demonstrated that wet wiping, wet mopping and using a vacuum are effective in removing World Trade Center dust – including asbestos and other contaminants.
- Faced with unprecedented circumstances; a dire need for local, state and other federal environmental, health, emergency response, and law enforcement agencies to receive monitoring data; and a public and press clamoring for information, EPA made monumental efforts to quickly assess and distribute our findings. In fact, the IG’s report states that, “In regard to the monitoring data, we found no evidence that EPA attempted to conceal data results from the public.”
- Given the magnitude of the disaster, the massive response, the very real security issues, and the many agencies involved, the Executive Branch, represented by the Council on Environmental Quality, assumed a coordinating role. Their efforts to coordinate communications through early Agency press releases had no impact whatsoever on EPA scientific judgements and assessments.
- EPA’s response to the attack on the World Trade Center was nothing less than extraordinary.

For additional information, contact Bonnie Bellow, Director, Public Affairs Division, Region 2, at 212-637-3660.