

Talk given the IV International Media Forum on the Protection of Nature:

PROTECTION OF NATURE, PROTECTION OF HEALTH

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Since this conference is devoted primarily to the subject of health, I would like talk to you today about what is slowly emerging in the U.S. about the health impacts of the two major events of recent years – September 11th and hurricane Katrina. Unfortunately what I will be discussing today points to a cover-up of tragic proportions by the U.S. government and other supposedly responsible institutions.

Let me first talk about the air quality effects of 9/11. Early in September 2006, the Mt. Sinai Medical Center released a study that found 70 percent of the first responders – the police and firemen – suffer lung problems today because of their work at Ground Zero. Information collected about the health effects on residents, people who work in the area, and school children show similar patterns.

But especially those effects did not necessarily have to happen – except public officials told people these were not problems. The then-head of the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Christie Todd Whitman, repeatedly declared the air safe. And now thousands of people are sick, and some have died, from World Trade Center contamination.

Two internal government memorandums recently obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the EPA knew from the beginning that the air around Ground Zero was unsafe. Here is one EPA memo from three weeks after the tragedy, when the Chief of the Response and Prevention Branch for the EPA wrote that "Air sampling by EPA and others indicates that asbestos and other contaminants are present in the air at the World Trade Center." Another memo, from the New York City Health Department: "EPA has been charged with leading the air quality sampling effort" but "EPA has been very slow to make data results available and to date has not sufficiently informed the public of air quality issues arising from this disaster." Even so, the memo goes on, people were being allowed back into buildings in the surrounding neighborhood. "Department of Environmental Protection believes the air quality at those locations is not yet suitable for reoccupancy." But this information was never revealed to the public.

Several US Congressmen called a press conference this fifth anniversary and cited a report by the EPA Inspector General finding that the Bush White House

instructed the EPA to downplay air quality concerns. The EPA was ordered to "reassure the public." They were to amend their news releases by removing cautionary statements and adding reassuring ones. Even though tests would later reveal that dust from Ground Zero contained high levels of fiberglass and pulverized asbestos. A federal judge has stated that these actions "shock the conscience."

As late as the beginning of 2002, contamination levels higher than those emitted by the oil fires in Kuwait were being detected around the World Trade Center site.

In calling for a Special Counsel to consider whether criminal charges should be brought against Christie Todd Whitman, the congressmen also revealed what was perhaps behind her "deliberate and misleading statements" She was also a major stockholder in one of the insurance companies which saved hundreds of millions of dollars through her statements of safety. And she was a bond holder in one of the responsible entities being sued by many individuals – the Port Authority that owned the World Trade Center site.

"Until we fix the broken government, none of us is safe," said Hugh Kaufman, who has been with EPA since its beginnings.

And this problem was not confined to 9/11. Let's look now at New Orleans, where the US EPA has given the city a clean bill of health and residents a green light to return to their homes after Katrina. There is a difference in terms of air pollutants. In New York it was very alkaline particulate matter that was severely irritating to the lungs along with all of the combustion products from everything that was burning. In New Orleans it was mostly organic matter, so it was sediments blowing around in the air and also mold spores and endotoxins from bacteria. This results in long-term health problems

The Natural Resources Defense Council did its own sampling in New Orleans and compared these with the EPA's clean up standards. The nonprofit organization's scientists discovered that the arsenic levels, lead levels, diesel fuel levels and levels of other sooty contaminants are all above the threshold that would normally trigger clean up or at least investigation. EPA has dismissed those results saying that it is likely the contamination was present before the hurricane.

The EPA has announced that it is not going to enforce its normal regulations on asbestos that may be generated from bulldozing places in New Orleans. This means it is possible that the asbestos levels in the air could be quite high, especially for people living near where homes are being bulldozed.

But many Americans this fall were beginning to find it ironic that EPA was announcing the sediment is safe and there are no toxic contaminants left behind

from the flooding – right at the same time that information was coming out that the agency gave a false all-clear in New York.

At the same time, often volunteers are the ones helping remediation efforts in the wake of the hurricane. Because of the hazardous nature of this work, civilians should not be expected to perform some of those duties. In fact, with the amount of money spent for just a few days in Iraq, the federal government could perform all the remediation in the Gulf Coast more quickly and safely than the volunteers, who lack adequate protective gear and training. The dust masks the volunteers are wearing are simply not adequate to protect them from toxics like benzene, lead, arsenic, asbestos, and toxic molds.

Now, what about molds? This is shocking as well. Excessive exposure to molds and the toxins they produce can cause very serious illnesses. Well, what about a paper written by three so-called experts on behalf of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. One of these is a former expert witness for Philip Morris tobacco company along with his business partner, and the other generates substantial income as an expert witness in mold litigation. They made the finding that illness from mold toxins is "highly unlikely at best, even among the most vulnerable of subpopulations." None of the 83 papers they cited for reference make this finding. They did their own extrapolated math to come to this conclusion and the ACOEM legitimized it by accepting it as their position paper. As it turns out, they were preparing this as a *defense* document for future litigation!!

The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology issued a statement that is simply a rehash of this one. The president of that organization is a doctor who has accepted \$590,000 in funding from the Center for Indoor Air Research, a big tobacco funded front organization. The AAAAI has refused to retract its mold statement, even though it is clearly founded by junk science.

It pains me to stand here and tell you these things about what is happening in my country. But the truth needs to be told, just as it must be about the US government's refusal to acknowledge global warming which I spoke about here last year, and again the so-called scientists who knowingly accept vast sums of money from the big oil and coal companies to continue to promote these lies.

Thank you.