

EPA's 'safe air' statements after 9/11 criticized

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By Keith Mulvihill

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - An internal agency report is criticizing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for calling the air at Ground Zero "safe to breathe" during the days immediately following the attack on the World Trade Center.

The EPA did not have "sufficient data" to make this statement, the agency's Office of Inspector General (OIG) states in a preliminary report that has been leaked to the press. The OIG is an independent government group that reports directly to Congress.

A timeline within the draft, which was first reported on Sunday by the Sacramento Bee newspaper, indicates that a final draft may be released at the end of the month.

"We share many of the same concerns that the initial OIG report identifies and we are gratified that an independent government oversight agency ... has come to the same conclusions and expresses the same concerns that we have been expressing all along," said Dave Newman, an industrial hygienist with the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH). NYCOSH is a labor union-based health and safety organization.

"It was premature and inappropriate for the EPA and Christie Whitman (the agency's administrator) to reassure the general public that the air was safe to breathe," Newman told Reuters Health.

"Particularly in light of the EPA's initial results from environmental sampling, which indicated a high percentage of their bulk samples contained 1 percent or greater asbestos," he added.

The report, obtained by Reuters Health, states that the EPA based its safe air declaration on a standard that was 100 times less protective than more traditional definitions of risk acceptability--one additional case of cancer among 10,000 affected people as opposed to one in a million.

This in itself is not a new revelation, according to Newman. "What is new is that there is a government agency raising these same concerns and being critical of the EPA," he said.

"Currently we don't know how widespread the contamination is, and we have no reason to believe that it is extensive, but on the other hand, we have no reason to believe that the situation is as benign as the government wants us to believe," said Newman.

"So we think that in order to ascertain exactly what the situation is, additional targeted testing needs to be done, primarily indoors for contaminants of potential concern."

If it is warranted, Newman recommended that appropriate clean-up procedures should be undertaken for both residences and workplaces in the area.

"This is a pretty devastating critique of the EPA," Newman concluded.

The EPA was unable to respond to requests for comment by deadline.

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