

**Advocates for Environmental Human Rights • Deep South Center on Environmental Justice •
Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University • Gert Town Revival
Initiative • Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development •
Miller-Travis Associates • Natural Resources Defense Council • Sierra Club**

November 17, 2009

Administrator Lisa P. Jackson
United States Environmental Protection Agency
Ariel Rios Building
1200 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Administrator Jackson:

We thank you for your attention and dedication to addressing contamination issues in communities across the country and in particular, in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region. These communities, mainly communities of color and low income, face many environmental and public health threats, some of which were seriously exacerbated as a result of Hurricane Katrina and the resultant broken levees in New Orleans. A new study, published online last week by the journal *Environmental Research*, demonstrates for the first time that Hurricane Katrina associated flooding resulted in new soil contamination. We now know that the widespread arsenic contamination measured by EPA scientists and others in the sediments left by the floodwaters was not the result of pre-existing contamination. These findings point to an unaddressed threat to public health that deserves immediate attention from EPA.

The peer reviewed study, conducted by researchers with the Natural Resources Defense Council, Xavier, Dillard, and Tulane Universities, compared arsenic levels in soil and sediment taken at three different time intervals. Archived soil samples collected in 1998–1999 were location-matched with 70 residential sites in New Orleans where post-flood arsenic concentrations were elevated. Those same locations were sampled again during the recovery period 18 months later. Arsenic levels in samples taken prior to the flooding were significantly lower than those measured in the post-flood sediments. The average difference between the two sampling periods was enormous by any standards – nearly 20 mg/kg of arsenic in soil higher than pre-Katrina, with a range of 3.60-74.61 mg/kg. Although arsenic levels dropped at most residential sites during the recovery period, 21 (30%) of the samples taken during the recovery period still had higher concentrations of arsenic than the matched samples taken prior to the flooding. In addition, 33% of samples from schoolyards and 13% of samples from playgrounds had elevated arsenic concentrations above the Louisiana state screening guidelines during the recovery period.

This new study demonstrates that arsenic contamination in New Orleans was not a significant problem prior to Hurricane Katrina, and that the contamination during the recovery period – particularly in schoolyards and playgrounds – remains a significant health concern.

We are asking you to help address this problem by taking the following actions:

- (1) Deploy a team of EPA scientists to do more comprehensive soil testing at playgrounds and schools in the previously flooded areas of New Orleans and make the results available to the public as soon as they are available;
- (2) Help ensure that the State of Louisiana releases the \$3.5 Million of recovery funding that was allocated in 2007 for Soil Assessment and Remediation in New Orleans so that contaminated schools and playgrounds, as well as highly-contaminated residential areas can be remediated;
- (3) If sufficient recovery funds are not available, help to identify other sources of funding to address contaminated soil in New Orleans; and
- (4) Develop, in consultation with local community stakeholders, a long-term plan to respond to environmental threats caused by future natural disasters.

Many previous residents of our City have not been able to return home because they fear it is not safe to bring their families, especially their children, back to live in New Orleans. We have been debating for four years now the levels of toxicity that exists in areas across the City that resulted from the devastation left behind by Hurricane Katrina with EPA.

We are asking that you and EPA review this new study on elevated levels of arsenic, and report back to us on what actions EPA will take to help remediate this contamination, and help us make New Orleans safe for families to return home.

We sincerely appreciate your commitment to helping us get back on our feet, and to ensuring that our local environment is safe, and not hazardous to us and our children.

Most sincerely,

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