

National Council for Occupational Safety and Health

**c/o New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH)
275 Seventh Avenue, 8th floor
New York, New York
212-627-3900**

For immediate release, October 6, 2005
Contact: Jonathan Bennett 212-627-3900 x 14

Gulf Coast Cleanup Workers Must Be Protected from Serious Health Hazards

Hundreds of the Nation's Leading Organizations and Experts Call on Congress for Immediate Action

The U.S. Congress should immediately act to protect the health and safety of workers and residents engaged in the cleanup of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, according to a group of more than 100 of the nation's foremost labor, religious, environmental, community, public health and public interest organizations and more than 100 academic, medical, religious and public health leaders.

In a letter sent on October 6 to every member of Congress, the group – which includes the nation's top experts in the fields of occupational and environmental medicine and industrial hygiene -- warns that “thousands of disaster responders, workers and volunteers in the Gulf Coast areas affected by Hurricane Katrina and Rita remain inadequately protected against exposure to environmental health hazards.”

“We're seeing who gets hurt when you ignore safety and health protections,” said Juan Alvarez, Director, Latin American Organization for Immigrant Rights in Houston. “Contractors are hiring immigrant workers right here in Houston and taking them to New Orleans to do cleanup. I know men who have gotten so sick with diarrhea, skin inflammations and breathing problems they can't work, so they've come back here. The contractors just hire more. Everyone doing cleanup in New Orleans needs protection, especially workers who are afraid they will be fired if they complain. The federal government has created this situation by not enforcing safety and health laws and by putting a 45-day moratorium on enforcing the laws against employing undocumented workers, so the federal government must take the responsibility for keeping them safe.”

The letter to Congress maintains that “thousands of workers and residents were unnecessarily exposed to toxic substances after being assured by EPA that the air was safe to breathe. . . . Now, more than a month after the storm, EPA and OSHA should immediately commence enforcement of life-saving workplace and environmental laws and regulations.”

“As the floodwaters recede, contaminants that remain have the potential to become airborne. . . creating an even greater occupational and public health hazard.”

The letter outlines concrete steps the federal government should take to protect workers from the millions of gallons of petroleum, toxic substances from Superfund sites, bacteria, lead, mercury, hexavalent chromium, arsenic and pesticides that contaminated the floodwaters. These include:

- adoption of “appropriate precautionary measures to be implemented until the work environment is demonstrated to be safe;”
- initiation of a comprehensive environmental sampling plan;
- worker training about occupational and environmental health and safety hazards;
- medical surveillance of clean up workers; and
- appropriate decontamination.

In addition, the letter calls for special protection for immigrant and temporary workers who are least likely to be provided with proper training and respiratory protection.

- *Peg Seminario, AFL-CIO Safety and Health Director:* “Gulf Coast residents and workers have been physically, emotionally and financially devastated by this disaster. Congress and the Bush Administration have a responsibility to act to protect the safety and health of citizens and workers during recovery and reconstruction, so that the tragedy that has already occurred is not made even worse.”
- *John H. Thomas, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ:* “In the days immediately following Katrina's landfall, at a time when lives were at stake, we watched with admiration and gratitude as rescue workers sought out and saved victims without regard for their personal safety. Now that we have moved into the long term recovery effort, the urgent concern for rebuilding the Gulf Coast should not become an excuse for failing to protect the health of those doing the rebuilding. Persons desperate for jobs and eager to share in the rebuilding of their communities must not be asked to expose themselves to the risk of long term health problems caused by Katrina's toxic residue.”
- *Carl Pope, President of Sierra Club:* “Weakening environmental laws is the worst thing Congress could do right now. Instead, our elected representatives should step in and force the Administration to do its job,” said Carl Pope, Executive Director of the Sierra Club. “Our government failed to protect Americans from exposure to toxic pollution in the aftermath of the September 11 attack. Now we see a similar failed response to the Katrina hurricane. The public has every right to expect strong action to protect public health in the wake of a national disaster. This is a time for responsible, truly compassionate leadership.”
- *Joel Shufro, Executive Director, New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health:* “The potential for workers and residents to be exposed to toxic and life-threatening substances is real. Regulatory agencies with the responsibility for protecting the health of workers and residents along the Gulf Coast are not enforcing essential rules, and are making statements that minimize the seriousness of the hazards. The agencies’ actions are very similar to the flawed and dangerous approach that became official policy in the aftermath of 9/11.”
- *Marylee Orr, Director, Louisiana Environmental Action Network:* “Worker and community safety is one of our immediate and primary concerns. One worker accidentally fell into the New Orleans floodwaters and had to spend six hours in the emergency room due to exposure to the heavily polluted floodwaters. Long term environmental damage to Lake Ponchartrain, New Orleans and the surrounding areas is our next concern. The sources of toxic pollutants adding to this problem are many, including an existing superfund site in New Orleans that's been underwater for weeks. Relaxing environmental regulations will only make all of the problems worse while bringing little or no positive benefits.”