

LET THEM EAT DIRT

Will the “Mother of All Toxic Cleanups” Be Fair to All NOLA Neighborhoods, Even When Some Contamination Predates Katrina?

By Robert D. Bullard

April 14, 2006 – Hurricane Katrina has been described as a one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S history. A September *Business Week* commentary described the handling of the untold tons of “lethal goop” as the [mother of all toxic cleanups](#). However, the billion dollar question facing New Orleans is which neighborhoods will get cleaned up and which ones will be left contaminated.

Tons of trash, hurricane debris, flooded cars, and contents from gutted homes and businesses still line some neighborhoods streets. The Army Corps of Engineers is the agency charged with one of the [biggest environmental cleanups](#) ever attempted: scraping miles of sediment laced with cancer-causing chemicals from New Orleans' hurricane-flooded neighborhoods.

Sediments of varying depths were left behind by receding Katrina floodwaters primarily in areas impacted by levee overtopping and breaches. More than [100,000 of New Orleans 180,000 houses](#) were flooded, and half sat for days or weeks in more than six feet of water. Government officials estimate that as many as 30,000 to 50,000 homes citywide may have to be demolished, while many others could be saved with extensive repairs.

Several weeks ago organizers of the [A Safe Way Back Home](#) initiative, the [Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University](#) (DSCEJ) and the [United Steelworkers](#) (USW), undertook a proactive pilot neighborhood clean-up project—the first of its kind in New Orleans. The clean-up project, located in the 8100 block of Aberdeen Road in New Orleans East, removed several inches of tainted soil from the front and back yards, replacing the soil with new sod, and disposing the contaminated dirt in a safe manner. Participants included residents and Steelworkers who have received training in Hazardous Materials handling in programs funded by the NIEHS [Worker Education and Training Program \(WETP\)](#).

Volunteer partners for the clean-up effort included Common Ground, Moving Forward Gulf Coast, Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, National Resource Defense Council, Clark Atlanta University Environmental Justice Resource Center, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, National Black Environmental Justice Network, and Rebuild Hope Now. Corporate support comes from contributions made by four USW employers: McWane, Inc.; Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company; BF Goodrich; and Bridgestone Americas Holding, Inc.

The staging area for the project was located at the Parish of St Maria Goretta Catholic Church parking lot. Other professional services were donated by R & P Landscaping and

House Call Home Care Associates. These organizations, along with over 125 college students from across the country, provided countless hours of volunteer time and other resources to help make this initiative a success.

The “A Safe Way Back Home” initiative is funded in part by the Ford Foundation, the Public Health Institute, the Public Welfare Foundation, the Gulf Coast Ecological Health & Community Renewal Fund, Foundation for the Mid-South, and Natural Resources Defense Council. The broader goal of A Safe Way Back Home is to provide a sustained effort over the next several months as hundreds of thousands of survivors of this disaster—many of whom are poor, disenfranchised and African American—begin the long, painful task of rebuilding their lives. Much of the work of this project focuses on the research, policy, and community outreach and assistance and education of the displaced minority population of New Orleans.

The DSCEJ/USW coalition received dozens of requests and inquiries from New Orleans East homeowners associations to help clean up their neighborhoods block-by-block. State and federal officials labeled the voluntary clean-up efforts as “[scaremongering.](#)” And a week later, a Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) staffer ate a spoonful of dirt scraped from the Aberdeen Road pilot project. The dirt-eating stunt was clearly an attempt to disparage the proactive neighborhood clean-up initiative. LDEQ officials later apologized.

Despite barriers and red tape, a few Katrina evacuees are slowly moving back into New Orleans’ damaged homes or setting up travel trailers in their yards. They want to know if it’s safe. Homeowners are gutting their houses, treating the mold, fixing roofs and siding, and slowly getting their lives back in order. It will be years before the [repopulation of New Orleans](#) is completed. Rebuilding “community” is a major challenge for neighborhoods stripped of physical and social infrastructure that most of us take for granted, such as schools, churches, banks, grocery stores, and social networks.

Returning residents are getting mixed signals from government agencies when it comes to contamination and potential public health threats. In December, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) announced “there is no unacceptable long-term health risk directly attributable to environmental contamination resulting from the storm.” Two months later, in February, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) [test results](#) came out with different conclusions. NRDC’s analyses of soil and air quality after Hurricane Katrina revealed dangerously high levels of contaminants in some New Orleans area neighborhoods.

Government and independent scientists remain worlds apart and offer divergent interpretations of what contamination is in the ground, how harmful it is to returning residents, and the appropriate remediation plan. Just this past week, a multi-agency task force (Agencies that participated in the investigation and analyses are the EPA, LDEQ, Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (LDHH), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the New Orleans Health Department) issued a [press](#)

[release](#) that appears to endorse the notion that it's acceptable for New Orleans residents to return to neighborhoods with elevated lead if those same neighborhoods were polluted before Katrina.

EPA and LDEQ recommend that “residents in the vicinity protect themselves and their children from potential exposure to lead in the home and in the surrounding soil of their neighborhoods.” The facts are clear on lead. All levels of government have done a lousy job protecting children from this preventable disease. New Orleans pre-Katrina lead statistics speak for themselves. It is no secret that before Katrina, over 50 percent (some studies place this figure at around 70 percent) of children living in the inner city neighborhoods of New Orleans had [blood lead levels](#) above the current guideline of 10 micrograms per deciliter. Childhood [lead poisoning](#) in some New Orleans black neighborhoods was high as 67 percent. Some of the lead problem comes from old lead paint in homes and some from lead in the soil.

Instead of cleaning up the mess, government officials are engaged in “[poison politics](#)” and appear to be taking the position that “dirty neighborhoods should stay dirty forever.” This position is not only unjust, it is immoral and it should be illegal. Just because lead and other heavy metals existed in some New Orleans neighborhoods before Katrina doesn't mean that they are safe, or that there isn't a moral or legal obligation to remediate any and all contamination uncovered.

Making a \$2,000-\$3,000 government grant available to individual homeowners to test and cleanup contamination in their yards is a bargain given the millions of hurricane [relief dollars wasted](#) on profiteering, [no-bid contracts](#), and material markups—debris removal contracts sometimes included markups of as much as 47 percent. Under [disaster capitalism](#), some contractors are “looting” the government post-hurricane recovery funds. Surely, if the federal government can pay for debris removal, blue tarp roofs (even on some homes with lead-based paint), and temporary trailers housing (which have already cost an estimated \$4.5 billion), it should also make funds available to address the “[silent killer](#)” of childhood lead poisoning and contamination in residents' yards. This “band-aid” approach stops short of addressing the root problem—environmental hazards found inside and outside of homes in older neighborhoods.

The way toxic cleanup in New Orleans neighborhoods is being handled is tantamount to a giant “human experiment.” However, this is not the first time the U.S. government has participated in or funded questionable experiments. Before Katrina, African Americans and other people of color learned the hard way that waiting for government action can be hazardous to their health. And in some cases, as clearly demonstrated in Katrina and other emergencies, ([Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#); [PCB Contamination in Warren County North Carolina](#); [Baltimore Childhood Lead Poisoning Experiment](#); [Experimental AIDS Drugs Tested on Foster Children](#); [Washington, DC Anthrax Attack](#); [Children's Environmental Exposure Research Study \(CHEERS\)](#); [Bogalusa, Louisiana Chemical Leak](#); [Graniteville, South Carolina Train Wreck](#); [Dickson, Tennessee Contaminated Wells](#)), government actions themselves have been harmful.

Government scientists assure New Orleans gardeners that they do not need to worry about soil salinity and heavy metal content. They also say residents need not worry about digging or planting in the soil. Growing vegetables for consumption is not affected, and there is no need for special soil treatment before replanting.

The LDEQ and EPA have a trust problem in some neighborhoods. This trust problem predates Katrina. Many Katrina evacuees have simply lost trust, and for good reason, in government to respond to their needs in an effective, fair, and just way. It is easy for government officials to make broad pronouncements about safety from their plush offices and safe suburbs in Baton Rouge (LDEQ), Dallas (EPA Region VI), Atlanta (CDC and ATSDR), and Washington, DC (EPA Headquarters).

Given the uncertainties that are built into quantitative risk assessments, how certain are these government officials that all of New Orleans neighborhoods are safe? If it's that safe, are these government officials willing to move their spouses and children into environmental "hot spot" neighborhoods while the debates rage about remediation strategy? Will they commit to enrolling their children in New Orleans neighborhood schools and allow them to play at neighborhood parks and playgrounds? Will they agree to eat a "Katrina salad" (tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce grown in the neighborhood gardens) each night for ten years?

Agreeing to the questions posed earlier would send a strong signal to Katrina evacuees that the government is not run by a bunch of hypocrites who subscribe to "do what I say, and not what I do." Government leaders should learn from past mistakes and past successes and adopt [The Precautionary Principle](#) as the overarching guide to protect all Katrina-impacted communities. Benjamin Franklin's famous quote (also reinforced by our grandmothers), "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," is a perfect guide for post-Katrina cleanup and reconstruction.

The April 4 EPA/LDEQ [press release](#) only applies to lead, not arsenic, diesel-range organics, benz(a)pyrene, and the other elevated levels of contamination found in post-hurricane sampling. For example, government samples turned up levels of benzo(a)pyrene exceeding EPA's residential guidelines in the Agricultural Street community. This is not the first time contamination was uncovered in this neighborhood. In the early 1980's, the Agricultural Street community (Gordon Plaza Subdivision, Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) housing, Gordon Plaza Apartments, the Moton Elementary School, the Press Park residential area and community center) was constructed over the [Agriculture Street Landfill, \(ASL\)](#) site.

The 95-acre site was used as a municipal landfill receiving municipal waste and construction debris for more than 50 years prior to being developed for residential and light commercial use. The landfill was also used to dispose of debris from Hurricane Betsy in 1965. It closed in 1966.

Metals, pesticides, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) were found in surface and subsurface soils during environmental studies. The Agricultural Street site was added

to the National Priorities List as a Superfund site in 1994. Residents pushed for a buy-out of their property and to be relocated. The federal EPA disagreed and ordered a “clean-up” at a cost of \$20 million. The actual clean up began in 1998 and was completed in 2001. Government officials assured the Agricultural Street community residents that their neighborhood was safe after the “clean-up.” The Concerned Citizens of Agriculture Street Landfill disagreed and filed a class-action lawsuit against the city of New Orleans for damages and cost of relocation. It took nine years to bring this case to court. The lawsuit was finally settled last month.

Federal officials are now debating the appropriate course of action to take in the Agricultural Street community and a dozen or so New Orleans neighborhoods where contamination by [toxic metals](#) predates Katrina. The federal EPA and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality are debating what [remediation](#) action is needed for the fourteen neighborhood environmental “hot spots” scattered across older New Orleans neighborhoods: three sites in Gentilly, two in Treme, two in Central City and one each in the Bywater, Lower 9th Ward, Carrollton, Uptown, Mid City, St. Roch and Seventh Ward. The 14 neighborhoods were narrowed down from a list of 46 sites examined by state and federal officials last fall that showed high levels of lead, arsenic or a carcinogenic petroleum constituent, benzo(a)pyrene.

We know from previous disasters that mistakes will be made. Without the proper training, equipment, and site characterization, as in the case of the 9/11 World Trade Center response, we know [workers will get sick](#). There are some who argue that environmental health was given [low priority](#). The end result is that many of our [forgotten heroes](#) are getting sick from the [unhealthy air and dust](#) at ground zero.

Nearby residents and schoolchildren were also at risk from the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. Many children who returned to seven [schools near ground zero](#) in early 2002 complained of respiratory problems and headaches because of inadequate cleaning and ventilation of the reopened schools. These are clear lessons that we can learn from 9/11 in the Katrina cleanup and reconstruction. Schools must be treated as special cases.

It is imperative that New Orleans schools and the land on which they sit are safe, clean, and free from health threatening contamination. New Orleans school yards, playgrounds, and parks should be special targets for environmental cleanup. Children form a special vulnerable population and must be protected. Existing schools and school grounds should be tested and remediated to the most protective existing clean up guidelines set by the EPA. It should not matter if the places where children play were polluted before or after Katrina. This is the time to clean up the problem now that most of New Orleans schools are closed and their students are away.

New Orleans 117 schools served about 60,000 students before Katrina. Evacuated children are enrolled in school districts from Arizona to Pennsylvania. Three months after the devastating storm and levee break only one New Orleans school was open. In January 2006, state and local officials approved new [charter schools](#) in some of the same

buildings that once housed New Orleans traditional public schools before Katrina. According to the Brookings Institution's [Katrina Index](#), seven months after the storm only 25 New Orleans schools were open—and half were charter schools.

Repairs and rehabilitation of schools should use construction standards, building materials, and methods that will ensure a [healthy school environment](#) and good investment for the community. In some cases new schools will have to be built because of the severity of damage to school structures from the hurricane. The best green construction and “greenbuilding” technology should be used to ensure healthy indoor air, non-toxic materials for construction, maximum design for energy efficiency, and natural light for improved learning.

While the inside environment is being addressed by individual homeowners, the outside environment—yards, parks, and school playgrounds—is another matter. Both indoor and outdoor environments are important—especially for children. A number of [asthma triggers](#) are associated with excess moisture and mold. Asthma, like lead poisoning, disproportionately affects poor and minority, inner-city children. Given the severity of the problem, Katrina will likely trigger a new round of federally funded [environmental health studies](#)—including asthma studies.

Health effects associated with both indoor and outdoor pollution include increased perinatal mortality, increased acute respiratory illnesses (e.g., bronchitis and pneumonia), aggravation of asthma, increased frequency of physician visits for chronic cough and ear infections, and decreases in lung function. Independent tests conducted by the Natural Defense Council (NRDC) in mid-November found dangerously high [mold counts](#) in New Orleans' air. Numerous studies have found a relationship between [damp indoor spaces](#) and adverse health outcomes.

Residents of impacted neighborhoods do not need government agencies debating the “chicken or egg” contamination argument (“which came first, the contamination or Katrina”). They simply need them to clean up the mess—regardless if the contamination predates Katrina. Toxic contamination in the soil or inside the home can be just as harmful to humans if it was present before Katrina or was left by receding floodwaters.

All levels of government have a golden opportunity to get it right this time. Numerous writers, have detailed New Orleans' shamefully [sluggish](#) and [patchy](#) reconstruction effort. However, environmental injustice may be compounded by [rebuilding on poisoned ground](#). Opportunities are fading as Katrina slowly slips off the political radar and the 2006 hurricane season approaches. Many people wonder if FEMA will be [ready](#) for the 2006 storms. We all win if it's done right this time.

Robert D. Bullard directs the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. His most recent book is [The Quest for Environmental Justice](#) (Sierra Club Books, 2005).