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Safety of Post-Hurricane Sludge Is Disputed

Government Has Minimized Public Health Threat of Toxic Contaminants in New Orleans, Group Says

By [Spencer S. Hsu and Juliet Eilperin](#)

Washington Post Staff Writers

Thursday, February 23, 2006; Page A03

Floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina deposited arsenic, lead and petrochemical compounds across greater New Orleans in amounts that are potentially dangerous to human health despite federal and state assurances that the sludge is safe, according to a new study based on Environmental Protection Agency data.

The study, which was conducted by the Natural Resources Defense Council and is being released today, urges the government to clean up the waste before permitting young children to return to the struggling city.

The NRDC report, which was obtained by The Washington Post, comes as a new internal report of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service suggests that as much as 350,000 gallons of hazardous materials are threatening the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana as a result of Hurricane Rita.

Government officials have minimized the public health threat in New Orleans, the environmental group said. Louisiana officials have said some toxic contaminants have been found only on golf courses that use pesticides containing arsenic, but the NRDC report includes maps detailing dozens of high arsenic levels taken across wide swaths of the urban area.

"State and some federal officials have been consistently denying there are any significant risks from the toxic mud that has spread across the city," said Erik Olson, a senior NRDC lawyer. "The data they themselves have collected show that, to the contrary, there are significant risks from arsenic and toxic chemicals that have blanketed much of New Orleans."

Environmental activists are calling on government agencies to clean up contaminated sediment; test schools and playgrounds; and provide information and protective equipment to residential and business property owners. Many toxins are especially dangerous to children, and metals such as lead can stunt development.

"Young children should not play in any areas where there is still sediment on the ground," wrote the report's authors, Gina M. Solomon and Miriam Rotkin-Ellman. "It would be best to keep children out of the city until cleanup has occurred."

Tami Frazier, a spokeswoman for Mayor C. Ray Nagin (D), referred questions to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality.

Tom Harris, administrator of the department's Environment Technology Division, said the NRDC and others have been "grossly misusing" state screening standards and presenting them as thresholds that would trigger government cleanups. He added that these toxicity guidelines would prompt further investigation rather than an automatic cleanup, and would have to be greatly exceeded before young children are harmed.

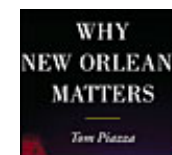
"We have taken to date almost 1,000 soil and sediment samples in New Orleans," Harris said. "I have not seen any samples that were a problem for acute exposure, short-term exposure," meaning up to two years, he said.

Graphic

[Contaminant Hot Spots](#)

Sediment left behind in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina contains toxic substances in many locations at levels that could trigger cleanups under state regulations, according to a National Resources Defense Council analysis of EPA soil samples taken from hundreds of sites throughout the city.

Friday, Feb. 24, 1 p.m. ET



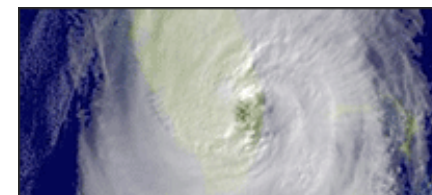
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The safety thresholds are based on exposure over 30 years, Harris said.

EPA spokeswoman Eryn Witcher said the agency "from day one" has provided air, water and soil sample analyses for its state and local partners, "quickly shared our information and then executed the appropriate next steps."



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