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Damage Control?

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Gary Bass is the founder and executive director of OMB Watch, a nonprofit research and advocacy group based in Washington, DC. OMB Watch has created a [Web tool](#) to help concerned citizens call on EPA to level with the American public about chemical hazards left by Hurricane Katrina.

From their recent statements, it would appear that government agencies are now taking seriously the threats posed by environmental hazards left in Hurricane Katrina's wake. The tone of official statements has changed markedly in the past week. From the head of FEMA's relief effort to EPA and OSHA officials, the new order of the day is caution and concern. But in light of the glaring absence of both timely and accurate information about risks and a coherent plan to address hazards from these agencies, it seems their statements reflect the need for damage control and responsibility dodging. It is troubling that, in the midst of one of the worst environmental disasters in our nation's history, such considerations would take precedent over public health and safety on the agendas of the very agencies charged with protecting American workers and families.

Indeed, from the dated and incomplete data available, it would appear that there is no Gulf Coast "environmental disaster" at all. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has released test results for toxic chemicals in flood water for less than 30 sites, all in downtown New Orleans, far from "hot spots" in outlying areas. Even these limited results were weeks old, despite ever-increasing numbers of clean-up crews and residents pouring into the surrounding region. EPA's "Response to Katrina" webpage indicates only a few hazardous chemicals having been found in qualities over their acceptable limit, none of which present a substantial risk to the public.

Risks to human health posed by hazardous chemicals likely to be present in flood-ravaged areas are also conspicuously excluded from publicly available information. EPA's website provides no information that would help someone identify symptoms of potentially life-threatening or debilitating exposures to hazardous chemicals, as they do for bacterial contaminant exposure. And recent EPA press release acknowledged the presence of 'fuel oils' in soil deposits left behind by flood waters, but the agency has still not released detailed data about the chemicals found. Many 'fuel oils' and other petroleum byproducts are known carcinogens—some can even breach protective gear—yet the release fails to warn of these potential cancer risks.

In the stew of contradictory and confusing information floating around about post-Katrina toxic hazards, legitimate concerns that acknowledge the magnitude of potential problems are going unnoted and unaddressed. But these concerns should be taken seriously. Massive amounts of toxic chemicals were present in the area before the storm. Thousands of sites in the storm's path used or stored hazardous chemicals, from the local dry cleaner and auto repair shop all the way to Superfund sites and oil refineries in Chalmette and Meraux, La., with huge stores of ultra-hazardous hydrofluoric acid.

And some of those sites were damaged and leaked. From the day Katrina passed over the Gulf Coast, reports from residents and media in the area told of oil spills, obvious leaks from plants, storage tankers turned on end, and massive fires. National organizations and folks on the ground, picking up the slack left by government agency reporting, have helped shed light on the "toxic gumbo" left in the Katrina aftermath and the inadequacy of relying on industry to take care of that mess.

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What's going on with leaks, spills and releases should be everyone's concern. No one knows the cumulative effects of and health risks presented by the mixing of chemicals that the EPA, state and local agencies, and environmental and community groups need to work together to protect residents and clean-up crews. Yet the EPA appears to be following the same dysfunctional pattern it did after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when the agency—caving to White House pressure— withheld warnings about the health risks of asbestos and other airborne chemicals at Ground Zero.

What you don't know *can* hurt you. We saw this with rescue workers at Ground Zero, many of whom continue to experience health consequences from their unwitting exposure. And we're seeing it again now with Katrina rescue workers, like Steve Dombrowski, who showed up last week to a clinic in Mississippi with chemical burns on his legs from wading in flood water, according to *The New York Times*.

The right thing for our agencies to do now is to level with the American people, so that, before returning to their homes or sending their children back to school, area residents will have the information they need to make the best possible choices. By expanding chemical testing, being more timely and forthcoming with test results, and engaging stakeholders, the EPA and other government agencies might actually carry out their charge of protecting the public. But, by focusing on damage control and silencing legitimate concerns, agencies only endanger American lives and further tarnish their own credibility. In recent weeks, we've seen how essential access to information is to our ability to deal with crisis; this is a lesson our agencies should take to heart.