It's safe to return to N.O., federal, state officials say

by Amy Wold
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Is the environment safe enough to return and live in New Orleans?

Federal and state officials say yes. Based on air, water and soil tests that were analyzed by public health physicians, state and federal agencies said Friday that they hadn't found anything that would cause health concerns for returning residents.

This "Environmental Assessment Summary" tries to answer what many former residents of the New Orleans area are asking, said Andy Kopplin, director of the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

"We're pleased to be able to say that residents can return to the affected areas and tourists can visit," Kopplin said.

With some exceptions, the water and soil left outside homes from Hurricane Katrina flooding don't appear to pose a health risk as long as people use common sense and observe personal hygiene like handwashing, state health officer Dr. Jimmy Guidry said.

In addition, the agencies looked at emergency room visits to see if New Orleans workers are seeing any increase in lung problems. Guidry said they didn't find anything out of the ordinary for this time of year in terms of upper respiratory problems, but they did find that more people are coming in with injuries from working in areas with hurricane debris.

Indoors, he said, mold is still a concern if a person is allergic or has other respiratory problems, but the outdoor air quality seems fine. It's riskier to stand near someone smoking a cigarette than to breathe the air in New Orleans, he said.


DEQ Secretary Mike McDaniel said that for the thousands of people who have been displaced from New Orleans and surrounding areas by the hurricanes, the conflicting reports in the last several months about the environmental health of the area has caused anxiety.

Dr. Jimmy Guidry, state health officer

The area has caused anxiety, Marylee Orr, executive director of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, said although it's true that some areas of New Orleans don't have a problem, many other areas do.

"The agencies say that returning residents should wear gloves, boots, safety glasses and dust masks, but they have not been found by all of the agencies. Is that the case? Yes," she said in an emailed response.

Earlier this month, the National Resources Defense Council and local environmental groups released a report that outlined finding "dangerously high levels" of industrial chemicals and heavy metals in the New Orleans area.

"We feel they are grossly misleading the public in their interpretation of the data," Eric Olson, senior attorney at NRDC, said during a telephone press conference Dec. 1.

Concerns outlined by the organization included finding high levels of arsenic, pesticides, petroleum products and heavy metals in soils left by the flood waters.

"The arsenic levels are so high that people should have concerns about contact with this sediment," said Dr. Gina Solomon with the NRDC. "Until these problems are cleaned up, it's not a good idea to have people moving into these areas long-term."

In answer to that and other reports, U.S. Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen asked the federal and state agencies to compile their results so far to help give guidance to the public, McDaniel said.

"This represents the culmination of that effort," McDaniel said.

According to the most recent report from state and federal agencies, samples had arsenic levels above Louisiana's natural background level. Of those, the risk ranged from a one-in-a-million to one-in-10,000 chance of a person getting cancer if they were exposed to that level over a lifetime.

McDaniel said state and federal agencies took thousands of samples and did a quarter-million analyses on those samples and then gave those results to environmental and public health scientists.

"Relative to flood water, there was no toxic soup," McDaniel said.

The concern about killing Lake Ponchartrain by pumping floodwaters also turned out to not happen, he said. Seafood samples taken in the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Ponchartrain waters have shown that it's safe to eat and air quality in the city — which now has less operating industry and traffic — is actually better than it was pre-Katrina, he said.

McDaniel said that DEQ and EPA have sampled for particulates — small pieces of dust that can cause lung problems — and they haven't found levels that would be a public health concern.

Soil testing found some areas that had lead, arsenic and pesticides which wasn't surprising since those are commonly found in urban areas, he said.

"These are pre-Katrina levels," McDaniel said.

All of the testing was done of outdoor conditions, not inside houses, and the report didn't take into account the area in St. Bernard Parish where the Murphy Oil spill is. That is being handled separately, according to the report.