

Toxic trailers: Another legacy of Katrina

by [Dean Peerman](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

The second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina has come and gone, and the storm's devastation continues to take its toll—sometimes in ways that are the consequence of human negligence, indifference, incompetence and just plain stinginess. For example, ongoing investigations by several environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, have revealed that the hastily and cheaply made mobile housing units provided to hurricane evacuees by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) contain dangerously high levels of formaldehyde.

When a large number of trailers were tested in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama by the Sierra Club, 83 percent of them were found to have unsafe formaldehyde concentrations. In one trailer the level of the strong-smelling gas was so high that it rivaled concentrations to which professional embalmers are exposed (which is why they are required to use safety equipment). Even the Environmental Protection Agency detected concentration levels that were three times its own recommended limit. (FEMA had the EPA do the testing but declined to release the bad news until forced to do so by investigators who invoked the Freedom of Information Act.)

Commonly used as a wood preservative in construction materials, formaldehyde poses both short-term and long-term health hazards. Among the short-term possible impacts: watery eyes; coughing and wheezing; burning sensations in the eyes, nose and throat; headaches; skin rashes; nosebleeds; nausea. Following lengthy exposure, formaldehyde can cause depression, fatigue, memory impairment, malignant tumors and acute respiratory distress. Also, it has been linked to cancer. At least two trailer deaths have been attributed to formaldehyde fumes.

Well over half of the approximately 120,000 trailers and mobile homes that FEMA supplied to the Gulf Coast are still occupied. The residents feel that they have no choice but to remain in them, since so little affordable housing has been built since Katrina. For months FEMA claimed that the trailers were safe and that it had

received few complaints; trailer occupants say that their complaints were often rebuffed or ignored by FEMA.

What happened to Lindsay Huckabee and her family seems fairly typical. When they moved into a FEMA trailer in Kiln, Mississippi, in December 2005, she, her husband and their four children were all healthy, she told Environmental News Service. But soon the entire family had respiratory problems, severe nosebleeds and other illnesses. One daughter developed acute asthma, and the husband, a nonsmoker, was diagnosed with a malignant tumor in his mouth. Huckabee's physician, who like other doctors in the Gulf Coast area says he has had many trailer patients with similar ailments, got in touch with the Sierra Club, which found harmful levels of formaldehyde in the trailer.

According to Huckabee, when she informed FEMA about the test findings she was treated rudely and given the runaround—and her request for a different mobile home was lost. Twice. When the Huckabees were finally given a replacement trailer, it was safer but still had an unacceptable level of formaldehyde. A FEMA inspector contended—without providing any evidence—that the people voicing complaints were just trying to get “bigger and better trailers.”

The formaldehyde problem is compounded by FEMA's attempts to cover it up. Following the trailer death last year of a man in Slidell, Louisiana, who had complained about the formaldehyde fumes, 28 officials from six agencies called for an investigation of the trailers' air quality. But FEMA attorneys advised against further testing on the grounds that it “could seriously undermine the agency's position” in any litigation and “would imply FEMA's ownership of this issue.”

The extent of FEMA's malfeasance came to the fore on July 19 in hearings conducted by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee after a ten-month congressional investigation. Committee chair Henry Waxman (D., Calif.) called FEMA's indifferent attitude toward storm victims, as revealed in FEMA documents delivered to the committee, “sickening” and “the exact opposite of what government should be.” The documents show, said Waxman, that “senior officials in Washington didn't want to know what they already knew, because they didn't want the legal and moral responsibility to do what they knew had to be done.”

When FEMA director David Paulison apologized and acknowledged that the hearing's revelations constituted “a wake-up call” for his agency, Waxman quipped, “Mr.

Paulison, you're a heavy sleeper." The criticism of FEMA came from the committee as a whole and was refreshingly bipartisan. Its top Republican, Thomas Davis of Virginia, charged that FEMA had tried to obstruct the investigation and later "mischaracterized the scope and purpose" of its own actions. "FEMA's primary concerns," said Davis, "were legal liability and public relations, not human health and safety." He accused Paulison of "hiding all the smoking guns."

Writing about the FEMA fiasco, syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts sounded almost homiletical. Terming FEMA's do-nothing decision "cool, considered and unfathomably cruel," he admonished an administration that makes "frequent claims of fealty to the divine" for failing to heed Matthew 25:40, in which "Jesus famously identifies himself with the poor."

Bowing to pressure, FEMA announced on August 1 that "out of an abundance of caution" it was suspending deployment of disaster trailers pending the results of study and review. FEMA should have utilized some of that abundant caution earlier.