

New Orleans 'toxic soup' a less serious problem than initially believed

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Despite the tragic human and economic toll from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita along the Gulf Coast in 2005, the much-discussed "toxic-soup" environmental pollution was nowhere close to being as bad as people thought.

That's the bottom-line message from dozens of scientific papers scheduled for presentation at a four-day symposium that opened here today at the American Chemical Society's national meeting, according to symposium organizer Ruth A. Hathaway. Entitled "Recovery From and Prevention of Natural Disasters," it is one of the key themes for the meeting, which runs through Sept. 14.

James Lee Witt, former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), will deliver the keynote address on September 14. Witt, now CEO of James Lee Witt Associates, LLC, headed FEMA during the Administration of President Bill Clinton.

"As I look at the presentations in this symposium, that's perhaps the most striking message," Hathaway said in an interview. "The dust has settled now and all the hoopla is over. We've actually had a chance to look at the real-world data from New Orleans. All indications at this point are that the hurricanes were not as devastating in stirring up chemicals as once feared.

"The data shows that there is no real need to ban fish consumption, for instance. Levels of some toxic metals are high in parts of New Orleans,

but not generally higher than before Hurricane Katrina or in some other urban areas.

Hathaway, of Hathaway Consulting in Cape Girardeau, Mo., is an organizer of the symposium, which includes 37 presentations on hurricanes, tornadoes and other disasters. Speakers range from chemists who analyzed levels of toxic metals in New Orleans to ecologists studying environmental consequences of Katrina's storm surge to academics reporting on damage and recovery of universities in the Gulf disaster zone.

In one report, Michael T. Abel, Ph.D., of Texas Tech University in Lubbock, describes finding potentially hazardous levels of lead and arsenic in New Orleans soil samples collected after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. "It should be noted that similar values found in this sampling effort were present in studies conducted before the hurricanes," Abel wrote in a summary of his presentation.

Jianmin Wang, Ph.D., and colleagues from the University of Missouri at Rolla, report that they collected 238 soil and sediment samples one month after Hurricane Katrina and analyzed them for pesticides and heavy metals. The pesticide levels were "generally not of great concern," they concluded.

In another study, Gregory J. Smith, Ph.D., reported that Hurricane Katrina's storm surge (rise in water driven by wind) severely scoured marshlands and barrier islands east of New Orleans and the Mississippi River. About 118 square miles of land in southeastern Louisiana was initially transformed into water, added Smith, who directs the U.S. Geological Survey's National Wetlands Research Center in Lafayette, La. Such changes reduce the ability of coastal wetlands to shield coastal communities from further hurricanes, he explained.

Smith believes science has a role to play in restoring the coast. "In many ways science, engineering and technology have played a role in human development of the coast, and it is these same enterprises that offer the greatest opportunity for transforming our coasts from ones that are vulnerable, like those impacted in 2005, to ones that are resilient," he said.

Source: American Chemical Society

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