



Hearing Summary

HEARING ON FEMA'S TOXIC TRAILERS

Rep. Henry A. Waxman

Chairman, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

On Thursday, July 19, 2007, the Committee held an oversight hearing on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) failure to respond adequately to reports of dangerous levels of formaldehyde in the trailers it provided to displaced victims of the Gulf Coast hurricanes. Witnesses at the hearing included current and former occupants of FEMA-provided trailers, an industrial hygienist, a pediatrician testifying on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the current Administrator of FEMA. At the hearing, the Committee heard about the adverse health effects the displaced victims of the Gulf Coast hurricanes experienced while living in FEMA-provided trailers and FEMA's failure to respond to their concerns. Additionally, Chairman Waxman released a summary of internal FEMA documents discussing the agency's response to reports of dangerous formaldehyde levels. The documents revealed that FEMA had recognized the presence and danger of formaldehyde as early as March 2006. Although FEMA field staff urged a response to protect public health, FEMA headquarters, particularly its Office of General Counsel, intervened to prevent action from being taken to understand and address the public health implications of the formaldehyde.

Adverse Health Effects. The Committee received testimony from three displaced Gulf Coast hurricane victims: Paul Stewart, Lindsay Huckabee, and James Harris, Jr. These witnesses testified about the adverse health effects they and their families experienced while living in FEMA-provided trailers and FEMA's non-responsiveness. The adverse health effects the witnesses experienced included nose bleeds, watery eyes, respiratory problems, and flu-like symptoms. According to the testimony received, these adverse health effects were common for families living in FEMA-provided trailers in the Gulf Coast. Ms. Mary DeVany, an industrial hygienist, testified that the limited testing that had been completed by the Sierra Club revealed that unacceptably high levels of formaldehyde were typical in the trailers.

FEMA's Failure to Respond. Despite numerous complaints, FEMA tested only one occupied trailer to determine its levels of formaldehyde. The test confirmed that the levels of formaldehyde were extraordinarily high, presenting an immediate health risk to the occupants. The monitored levels were 75 times higher than what the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health recommend for adult exposure in industrial workplaces. FEMA did not test any other occupied trailers, and released a public statement discounting any risk associated with formaldehyde exposure.

Documents provided to the Committee showed that despite repeated requests by FEMA field staff to conduct testing, FEMA's Office of General Counsel denied these requests because "should they indicate some problem, the clock is running on our duty to respond." Administrator Paulison admitted during the hearing that FEMA "could have moved faster" and that it would now address the problem.

Additional information, including Chairman Waxman's statement and copies of testimony, is available at www.oversight.house.gov.