

# ACTS FACTS

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## 9/11 MISTAKES REPEATED IN NEW ORLEANS

### Editorial

When the tragedy of 9/11 occurred, there was a system in place for handling environmental disasters. The system was called the National Contingency Plan. Under the NCP, the Environmental Protection Agency was assigned to be the lead agency, coordinating the activities of all the other agencies to provide protection for the public and the site workers. However, EPA chose not to take the lead. Instead, they let other agencies fight over jurisdictions. As a result, federal and state safety officials stood by and watched people work without respirators. And the Mayor of New York encouraged individuals to clean up the toxic dust from their homes and businesses themselves. Today, the numbers of sick workers and firefighters is still high and EPA has been served with lawsuits.

To find out how things went wrong, the 9/11 Commission was formed. This commission looked into the failure of various agencies to protect the public and to make recommendations to prevent these problems in the future. Central to the Commission's recommendations was the establishment of the new federal Department of Homeland Security (DHS). President Bush did not want to accept the recommendations of the 9/11 commission. Only after much lobbying and public pressure did the administration agree to set up the DHS.

After the DHS was formed, briefings for safety and security personnel were held around the country. I attended one of these full day events on March 17, 2004 sponsored by the Metropolitan section of the American Industrial Hygiene Association. We were told by DHS personnel that the DHS had on call experts in various kinds of disasters. We were told that when the next disaster occurs, the DHS would appoint the expert who was most experienced in that particular event (volcanic, flood, hurricane, etc.) to take the lead and coordinate the efforts of all local, state and federal agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In this way, all the agencies would be coordinated centrally.

When the New Orleans disaster occurred, however, the DHS, like EPA, did not take charge. They gave much of the responsibility to FEMA. FEMA was not equipped to direct all the resources and deferred many decisions to local authorities just as was done on 9/11.

The public blames FEMA and various local officials for the poor responses to the disaster when their anger should be directed at the administrator of the DHS who didn't do his job. And now Bush has said he thinks we need to reorganize relief procedures and appoint a single entity who would direct all of the disaster activities. Does this sound familiar to anyone?

-Monona Rossol