

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
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Katrina Press Conference

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Wednesday, September 14, 2005

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P-R-O-C-E-E-D-I-N-G

1:09 p.m.

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2
3 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: And we are
4 simply doing this so that people who aren't here
5 picking up the typewriters. So obviously, everyone,
6 all reporters are welcome to all parts of it. I know
7 we have producers. We have everyone. So welcome.
8 The first 40 minutes -- had -- Then we're going to
9 open it up. We'll reset. Mr. Johnson will give a
10 statement or -- reporting for broadcast -- for the
11 radio portion so radios can report.

12 And then he will have to step out and
13 he'll step in front of the cameras and he'll give a
14 statement to the cameras and then he'll take Q&A. Are
15 there any questions?

16 PARTICIPANT: Yes, how do we ask
17 questions?

18 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: That was laid
19 out in the press advisory. Forty minutes print, 20
20 minutes radio. Everyone can be here for everything.
21 I'm just saying if you can report and then walk out
22 and step in front of the camera.

23 PARTICIPANT: How do we ask questions?

24 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: We laid it out.
25 Anyone who called us knows there would be five
26 minutes.

1 PARTICIPANT: Excuse me.

2 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Yes?

3 PARTICIPANT: Hello?

4 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Yes.

5 PARTICIPANT: How do we ask questions?

6 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: After
7 Administrator Johnson gives his remarks, we'll open it
8 up to questions. I'm just going to ask that everyone
9 -- We'll start with everyone giving one question until
10 we run out of time. We will do one, we'll start with
11 one in the room, one on the phone and keep alternating
12 until we get through as many people as possible. We
13 just ask that you identify yourself before you ask
14 your question.

15 PARTICIPANT: There's a great deal of
16 background noise and when we ask questions, do you
17 press *1 or something? This is not like other phone
18 briefings I've ever been involved in.

19 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: I used the phone
20 system that we had here and that's what they told me
21 our capabilities are -- enough information as we can.

22 PARTICIPANT: Okay.

23 PARTICIPANT: How soon is this going to
24 start?

25 PARTICIPANT: She left for a minute.

26 PARTICIPANT: Yes, how soon is this going

1 to start?

2 PARTICIPANT: Eryn's gone. So it's just
3 us. We don't know.

4 PARTICIPANT: And Steve is not in the room
5 yet.

6 PARTICIPANT: Is there any way of dealing
7 with this background? It sounds like there's a local
8 swimming pool.

9 PARTICIPANT: Yeah. Perhaps that's
10 apropos.

11 PARTICIPANT: Is there a door open to the
12 corridor or something because it sounds like an echo
13 chamber?

14 PARTICIPANT: Yeah, we're closed.

15 PARTICIPANT: Thanks.

16 PARTICIPANT: It might echo a little bit.
17 It's a big room.

18 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: I'm sorry.
19 Before I grab the Administrator, any other questions?

20 PARTICIPANT: Eryn, can I just ask you a
21 question because I just got an email from Jim Jefferds
22 (PH). The Administrator gave a private briefing to
23 Senators and things.

24 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Yes. The EPW
25 Committee asked him to give them a briefing on what he
26 was doing and that's what he did this morning.

1 PARTICIPANT: Okay.

2 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: And that's why
3 I'm here. So you can ask him all the questions.

4 PARTICIPANT: Hello? Is this mute?

5 PARTICIPANT: No.

6 PARTICIPANT: Okay.

7 PARTICIPANT: There it goes. And you know
8 you have the -- so you can put it out now.

9 PARTICIPANT: Okay --

10 PARTICIPANT: Eryn, are you still there?

11 PARTICIPANT: EPA.

12 PARTICIPANT: I wonder how much that's
13 going to cost the company. That's not an 800 number -
14 -

15 (Several speaking but inaudible.)

16 PARTICIPANT: Three dollars for one
17 minute.

18 PARTICIPANT: I wonder when it's going to
19 get started.

20 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Can everybody be
21 sure to mute their phones?

22 PARTICIPANT: Yeah. That way we don't
23 hear keys clicking. That would be great.

24 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: I would ask that
25 you just save the questions until the end.
26 Administrator Johnson is going to open with some

1 remarks and then we'll open it up to questions and
2 answers.

3 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Very well.
4 Thank you very much for joining us. I've had the
5 opportunity before lunch to brief the Senate
6 Environmental Public Works Committee and I thought
7 that it would be also important to keep the public
8 informed as to what EPA is doing. Obviously, as the
9 rest of America, our thoughts and prayers are with the
10 victims.

11 But certainly in addition to thoughts and
12 prayers, EPA is on the scene. We've been on the
13 scene. We prepositioned on-the-scene coordinators
14 before the storm and we're on the scene taking care of
15 water, air and land issues there.

16 This is the largest national disaster that
17 we at EPA or we believe that the nation has faced and
18 certainly in my experience here at EPA of this
19 December 25 years it is the largest natural disaster
20 we've faced. We are in real time. This is a snapshot
21 in time as to the events and the actions that the
22 Agency's taking.

23 What I would like to do is to give you a
24 little bit of a walk-through and I have on one of the
25 charts is the things I'd like to cover in the brief
26 time, our immediate response, water quality, land,

1 air, helping prevent disease and communication. Those
2 will be the possible areas that I can cover in a few
3 minutes we have. Again, I'd be happy to answer
4 questions.

5 Our immediate response. As I said, we've
6 prepositioned our on-the-scene coordinators in Alabama
7 and in Mississippi and in Baton Rouge on August 27th
8 and August 28th. We deployed over 50 of our water-
9 craft. We now have onsite and you can see the chart
10 showing 470 staff in the Louisiana area, 157 in
11 Mississippi and 19 in the Alabama area. Our efforts
12 began early on and before the hurricane hit.

13 As the hurricane passed, then we began
14 deploying at recommendations of our on-the-scene
15 coordinators the teams of people that you now see on
16 the chart before you. We also began to identify what
17 were the immediate concerns.

18 The most immediate concerns that we faced
19 and certainly seen and was asked for assistance and
20 that was saving lives. We found that there were many
21 people, in fact, and as we've all witnessed stranded
22 particularly in the city of New Orleans. So the EPA
23 team who were on the scene early rather than doing
24 environmental assessment were actually rescuing
25 people. Our last count was the EPA team has rescued
26 almost 800 people, obviously the right priority.

1 We then turned our attention after the
2 initial rescue effort to beginning to assess the
3 environment damage that's been done. The first area
4 was water quality. A lot of questions --

5 (Technical difficulties.)

6 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: All right.
7 Now are we ready?

8 PARTICIPANT: Yes.

9 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: All right.
10 Let's try. The first issue I wanted to cover is water
11 quality and one of the questions that we were asking
12 ourselves is certainly what is the quality of the
13 floor water. We began taking water samples on
14 September 3rd looking for bacteria, particularly
15 coliform and E. coli, and we were looking for over
16 hundred priority chemicals ranging from pesticides to
17 metals to other industrial chemicals. We began
18 sampling on September 3rd.

19 I also shortly thereafter asked our
20 Science Advisory Board to convene an emergency expert
21 panel to provide advice and counsel to Agency on flood
22 water sampling and making sure that the continuing and
23 the future of flood water sampling was done in an
24 appropriate and scientific sound way. I appreciate
25 the Science Advisory Board's input to us.

26 On September 7th was when I was briefed

1 with the preliminary results from the flood water and
2 it was clear at that time that given the bacteria
3 levels and also lead contamination that the water was
4 unsafe, unsafe for the residents, unsafe for rescue
5 workers. That's why Dr. Herberding from CDC and I --
6 I did radio interviews and certainly did a press
7 conference to highlight --

8 (Technical difficulties.)

9 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Whoever is on
10 the line outside. please put it on mute. All right.
11 We'll continue. We have sampled every day. We are
12 continuing and will continue to sample the flood
13 waters until the flood waters have receded and we are
14 continuing to post the results of those flood waters
15 on our website and obviously make those available to
16 the first emergency responders and the teams that are
17 on the ground.

18 Again, we're continuing to sample. We're
19 seeing a range of chemicals from 24D, barium,
20 chromium, copper, sodium, iron. Again, for those that
21 have EPA Health Advisories or there are government
22 standards, the only ones that have been exceeded thus
23 far have been bacteria and lead. But there are other
24 chemicals that are showing up in the water.

25 So we are continuing to do the sampling.
26 You see on one of the charts both in front or behind

1 me as well as one of the charts that is in your packet
2 of what our flood water sample of plan is, those
3 samples that have been taken, those that are part of
4 our plan and yet to be taken and as we get those
5 results, then we will share with everyone.

6 It's obviously important. Everyone is
7 looking to EPA for what are the results and are these
8 done in a scientifically-appropriate and sound way?
9 We're doing that. We're not trying to be
10 bureaucratic. We want to make sure the results are
11 ones that we can all stand by. So we're continuing to
12 monitor flood water.

13 Drinking water and waste water, the next
14 area I want to talk about. On the chart, you can see
15 literally the hundreds of facilities that are or were
16 in the path of the first -- ranging from small
17 community water systems to large community water
18 systems. We are in the process with the state of
19 assessing each of those.

20 In some cases, they are not operating
21 because there is no electricity. In other cases, they
22 are operating but there is boil water advisory because
23 of our analysis to-date with the water unsafe. For
24 example, in the New Orleans system drinking water, two
25 drinking water systems for the downtown New Orleans
26 are operating but there's boil water advisory in

1 effect in New Orleans. So we have a parallel effort
2 of working with the states and the communities to
3 bring up the community water system, drinking water
4 system.

5 Also I have a chart showing the municipal
6 waste water facility, again, to get a sense of the
7 magnitude, the number of waste water facilities there
8 are in the effected area and there are many in the
9 Louisiana and Mississippi area particularly that are
10 not operating. And obviously we're working with the
11 state and local communities to try to get those to be
12 operational. Again, a variety of situations.

13 So drinking water systems obviously need
14 attention. Waste water treatment systems need
15 attention and we're on the scene to try to help the
16 state and local communities bring this back up.

17 We have deployed two of our mobile labs to
18 the area to try to help and provide real time water
19 sampling, drinking water sampling, so that we can help
20 facilitate and expedite information on whether the
21 water is safe to drink or not for those systems that
22 are up and operating.

23 The fourth area that I wanted to talk
24 about under water quality is Lake Pontchartrain and
25 the Mississippi River and the Gulf. We, the Louisiana
26 Department of Environmental Quality and USGS are doing

1 a range of sampling to assess the water in those
2 areas. Again, our first concern was the flood water
3 and the citizens that were still there. Obviously,
4 we're concerned about those water bodies, Lake
5 Pontchartrain, the Mississippi River, as well as the
6 Gulf.

7 The Corps of Engineers based upon our
8 recommendations installed booms so that as the water
9 was being pumped from the city into the lake or into
10 the canals or in one case into the Mississippi River,
11 to put a boom around where the water was being drawn
12 from (1) to help so that the debris wouldn't go in but
13 also (2) it serves as a physical barrier for those
14 things floating like oil or gasoline. Likewise, for
15 going back into the lake or canals, put a boom around
16 where it was coming in again so that if there was
17 material lighter than water and floating on the water,
18 it would also be captured and easier to remediate. In
19 addition, for some of the canals where we know that
20 oxygen levels in the water, dissolved oxygen could be
21 a problem, also we suggested that the Corps put
22 aerators and there are aerators in a number of the
23 canals to help with the dissolved oxygen issue that
24 could be a problem.

25 So water quality, we have a number of
26 efforts underway to ensure that we understand what the

1 flood water, what steps needed to be taken, steps to
2 bring up the drinking water system and waste water
3 treatment system as well as to assess the
4 environmental damage that may have been done to either
5 the lake and/or the river and/or the Gulf.

6 The second major issue that I want to
7 cover is land. There are a number of issues under the
8 land area. First is debris. We do not have a good
9 estimate of how much debris there is other than there
10 is just an enormous amount of debris, an enormous
11 amount, and I would not speculate on the amount.
12 There's just an enormous amount.

13 The kind of debris that we are seeing
14 ranges from tree limbs and trees to building material.

15 In some cases in some of the areas in fact, there is
16 a picture behind me that shows one of the EPA team
17 standing on what looks like a pile of two by fours
18 that once was some building structure. But we're
19 finding a lot of things.

20 We have recovered over 5,000 orphan
21 containers, if you will, and those orphan containers
22 range from gas cylinders to, there's a picture behind
23 me, that shows a red medical waste disposal drum that
24 we found floating. So what we are dealing with from a
25 debris standpoint is a range from debris limbs to
26 hazardous material.

1 So we've been working with each of the
2 states. We do have in place now a hazardous materials
3 preplan for Mississippi and for Alabama and focusing
4 on those kinds of things as well as PCDs, asbestos,
5 other things that may be present. We're working with
6 Louisiana to put such a plan in place as well. We do
7 have guidance out there with regard to building
8 materials and other things, but debris, the enormity
9 of the amount of material, is a challenge.

10 So a multi-pronged approach in working
11 with the states, the communities, to secure the
12 debris. In some cases, it's certainly a volume
13 problem. In other cases, it's going to be and is a
14 hazardous materials problem. It needs to be dealt
15 with. So debris and the clean-up of that debris,
16 again we're on the scene. We're providing advice and
17 counsel. We're managing those hazardous materials.

18 Another issue that we're very concerned
19 about is the sediment. As the flood waters recede,
20 there's sediment left and in your packet, you begin to
21 see some of the pictures and behind me there's a
22 picture to-date where some of the sediment is just as
23 the picture looks. It is an oily sediment that is
24 going to be a challenge to deal with in a number of
25 ways.

26 But we've begun to sample the sediment.

1 We don't have any results yet. But as soon as we get
2 those results, we're going to be sharing with
3 everybody. What our labs have reported to me is that
4 they have had some difficulty in doing some of the
5 analysis because the sediment samples like the ones
6 behind me are so laden with petroleum products that
7 it's hard to get those products out of the sediment so
8 that they can then look for other chemicals or
9 bacteria of potential concern. But they assured me
10 that we have the capability and we are sorting through
11 that. But nonetheless, we have begun taking sediment
12 samples and as soon as we get those results, we'll be
13 sharing it with everybody. But as you can see,
14 clearly we have petroleum at least in those sites
15 behind me that are a problem.

16 And we're going to continue to sample the
17 sediments. Again, we asked our Science Advisory Board
18 for their expert counsel and advice on our sediment
19 sampling plan and I expect to get their comments this
20 week. But we've gone ahead and started taking
21 sediment samples, but have asked for their advice and
22 counsel to make sure we're doing this in an
23 appropriate and comprehensive way given the situation
24 we have.

25 That's principally for Louisiana. We are
26 working with Mississippi and Alabama to look at since

1 there wasn't the standing water issue as New Orleans
2 is facing, are there sediment sampling or soil
3 sampling that we collectively feel is recommended? So
4 we're currently working with Mississippi and Alabama
5 to work our way through that.

6 Other land issues that we're facing.
7 There's a chart behind me that shows the risk
8 management plan and the superfund site facilities. As
9 you can see from the number of facilities and RMP
10 sites in this area where the hurricane hit 406 and
11 superfund sites 31 sites, those are the facilities at
12 the RMP level facility. There are many other smaller
13 facilities. So we're now looking at what are the
14 steps that we need to take to assure ourselves, to
15 assure the public that these RMP sites or superfund
16 sites have not been compromised.

17 We have visited the vast majority or many
18 of the superfund sites. Let me talk about New Orleans
19 for example. There are five superfund sites in New
20 Orleans. We've done a preliminary review. I mean
21 we've gone out and looked at the five. Well, let's
22 say we've looked at four. One of them is still under
23 water. The agricultural site is still under water.
24 So we've not been able to really get into it to assess
25 that.

26 The other sites we've looked at and it's a

1 range of things. We've seen fences down. Our
2 building's going back. We have done any sample
3 analysis ye, but again, whatever steps we need to take
4 to assure ourselves and the public that the superfund
5 sites or the RMP sites or others. There's PSD
6 facilities. There's just a variety of facilities that
7 we need to work our way through. Again, we're
8 committed to do that to work through and better
9 understand if there is or isn't a problem with regard
10 to land.

11 The other land and obviously it's a water
12 issue as well are oil and hazardous materials. The
13 Agency to-date has received through the National
14 Response Center 396 notifications. Now a notification
15 could be as simple as somebody picking up the phone
16 and calling and saying, "I smell a funny smell. Would
17 you please investigate" to a more significant, not
18 that that's not significant, but another type of phone
19 call that "We see an oil spill and we want to report
20 that."

21 What we have seen, we're obviously very
22 actively not just investigating the calls. We're on
23 the scene. We're out there looking and I'll tell you
24 about some of the more things that we're doing
25 including our ASPECT aircraft. But what we have been
26 actively involved with in particular with the Coast

1 Guard is that there have been five oil spills in the
2 New Orleans area to-date, five oil spills. The most
3 significant of the oil spills is a facility called
4 Murphy Oil. The company as well as EPA and the Coast
5 Guard again are on the scene, have stopped the leakage
6 and the company is with our assistance remediating the
7 problem. As I mentioned, there are a lot of hazardous
8 materials and the volume, I've already given you some
9 numbers on it.

10 Now I'd like to turn your attention to
11 air. Again, we're concerned about the water. We're
12 concerned about the land. We're also concerned about
13 the air. We put up our aircraft which is the Airborne
14 Spectral Photometric Environmental Collection
15 Technology also called ASPECT. And ASPECT was put up
16 in the air on August 30th and has been doing a number
17 of flights. The results of those flights, I believe,
18 are posted on our internet today.

19 In a lot of cases, we haven't seen
20 anything. The aircraft's capability is for screening
21 levels. It can take pictures which it does. It has
22 infrared technology capability. It has the ability to
23 detect radiological releases. It also has the ability
24 to detect a variety of chemicals again at a screening
25 level in a three to five part per million range.

26 What has happened where we've seen release

1 or we've seen something, the aircraft contacts our
2 ground folks and then to go in to investigate, to take
3 whatever steps necessary to investigate. One recent
4 example was our aircraft picked up a level of chloral
5 acetic acid which is an industrial chemical if you
6 will. And it was a concern to us. The aircraft
7 radioed our on-ground teams. They went over. They
8 pinpointed the location, found that it was a 55 gallon
9 drum. It was opened and the team remediated that.

10 We have dispatched two of our TAGA which
11 stands for Trace Atmospheric Gas Analyzer buses to be
12 able to do real time air sampling. And we will be
13 gathering those results and again providing those as
14 we get them.

15 There are a number of other air issues
16 including as you know across the United States we have
17 air monitors that are stationary to tell us whether
18 our ozone levels are high or not or whether there's
19 fine particulate matter. We need to assess what the
20 conditions are -

21 (Taping stops.)

22 That we have another set of teams of
23 individuals that are focusing their attention on. You
24 are all well aware of the fuel labored issues. So I
25 won't cover that but that was another air issue.

26 The last two items, the next to last is

1 helping prevent disease. We're working very
2 collaboratively with the Health and Human Services and
3 CDC in particular, the state and local health and
4 environmental agencies, on a myriad of issues ranging
5 from vector control advice to other advice and counsel
6 and it's a cooperative relationships and things are
7 working well.

8 Lastly, I'll talk about communications.
9 One of the lessons learned from post 9/11 among others
10 was the importance of communications and getting
11 information out and making sure that it's accurate but
12 getting the information out. We've been trying to do
13 that in a variety of forms whether it be through
14 advisories, through live radio that I've done and
15 Marcus Peacock, my deputy, has done, through TV and
16 through newspapers, through our coordination
17 mechanisms, the Joint Information Command, through
18 interagency efforts, through a variety of things. I
19 have another poster that gives a sense of the number
20 of advisories that we have released and the number of
21 announcements that we have and we'll continue to do
22 that.

23 With that, let me just close by saying
24 that again we at EPA have a great team of highly
25 qualified individuals who are on the scene, who are
26 here at Headquarters, who are here in Atlanta, who are

1 in our Dallas office who are providing whatever
2 support is necessary to make sure that this area is
3 restored. And we are on the scene protecting the
4 water and the land and the air. With that, I'll be
5 happy to answer any questions.

6 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Hold on just one
7 second. I know at the top of this I promised we would
8 reset the -- radio. I think since we ran long to take
9 just the rest of the half hour for Q&A. Any radio
10 that has a concern that needs him to reset with the
11 statement?

12 PARTICIPANT: Okay. Can I ask a question
13 please?

14 PARTICIPANT: I have a question, too.

15 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Okay. That's
16 fine. Do you want to start reporting now the Q&A and
17 we'll do a statement at the end?

18 PARTICIPANT: Hello. Should I go ahead?
19 Okay.

20 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Hold on. We're
21 going to start with one question in the room and then
22 we're going to the phones. Please identify yourselves
23 on the phone.

24 PARTICIPANT: Yes, I am --

25 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Hold on. We're
26 going to start with the room.

1 PARTICIPANT: Hello. Can I ask him my
2 question?

3 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Hold on.

4 PARTICIPANT: John has asked about the
5 source of lead and the flood waters. At this point,
6 do you know what the source is?

7 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: What we do
8 know is that there's high levels of lead in the flood
9 water and obviously that's a concern to us. But we
10 don't know what the source is. We all speculate
11 whether it's lead paint or lead from batteries. We
12 don't know what the source is. We know we have a high
13 level and that's of concern to us.

14 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Phone line.

15 PARTICIPANT: Hello?

16 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Can you hear us?

17 PARTICIPANT: Can I go ahead?

18 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Please.

19 PARTICIPANT: Hello, we're sitting in for
20 the French -- Mr. Johnson, I wonder if you could help
21 me out here. How much oil products are spilled at the
22 Murphy Oil site and secondly, what about --

23 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: I'm sorry. Just
24 one question per reporter. Your question is how much
25 oil at the Murphy site.

26 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: I don't have

1 the total off the top of my head. I would be happy to
2 get that for you and for the record. But I mean it
3 was in the thousands of gallons rather than the
4 millions of gallons of oil. But I would be happy to
5 get that for the record.

6 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: One for the
7 room.

8 MR. BORENSTEIN: This is Seth Borenstein
9 from -- Newspapers. You talk about the sediment being
10 so tainted with petroleum products that you had a hard
11 time testing. Could you give us a sense of how far
12 that taint is geographically and how deep the taint is
13 chemically and I noticed that most of the early flood
14 water testing was also nowhere near any of the
15 refineries and that's why we probably didn't see any
16 benzine or any of the oil products. Was that an
17 oversight or what?

18 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Let me comment
19 on the flood waters. Initially, when we started doing
20 the flood water sampling, we were not looking for
21 petroleum product. We could actually see them on top
22 of the water. So we weren't analyzing for them.

23 As we began, and I'm not sure whether it
24 was two days or three days, but as we thought about
25 and certainly as we got peer review from our Science
26 Advisory Board, we said we probably ought to make that

1 part of our standard and look even though we can see
2 some of the petroleum products floating on the water.

3 So we revised our testing.

4 With regard to the sediment, you can look
5 at the map that we've included and what our sediment
6 sampling plan is. You can see in the pink on the map
7 is where the flood water has been and you can see
8 where we have taken sediment samples, where we are
9 going to take sediment samples and they are obviously
10 in a variety of locations, in some cases, near
11 industrial sites, in some cases near superfund sites.
12 Again, our focus was where are the residents, where is
13 the high population, to make sure that we cover that
14 area in particular.

15 PARTICIPANT: Administrator Johnson.

16 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Yes.

17 PARTICIPANT: You mentioned --

18 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Could you
19 identify yourself please?

20 PARTICIPANT: I'm sorry. Ma'am, this is -
21 - from *U.S. News and World Report*. You had mentioned
22 briefly Mississippi. You said there weren't flood
23 waters like in New Orleans. Of course, land would be
24 a problem there, I'm assuming. How many superfund
25 sites are there in Mississippi? Have you looked at
26 those? Is that the major problem in Mississippi?

1 What is the major environmental problem in
2 Mississippi?

3 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: We're still
4 assessing. I don't have the total number of -- How
5 many superfund sites? Four? There are four in
6 Mississippi I am reminded that look like may have been
7 impacted there. Again, there are a number of
8 superfund sites in that area but four that would have
9 appeared in the flood's path. At this point, what's
10 probably the major issue there is the debris
11 management and again we're encountering a variety of
12 hazardous material.

13 PARTICIPANT: What kind?

14 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: I'm sorry. We
15 don't have time -

16 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: It's just a
17 variety of hazardous materials. Again, Mississippi
18 just like Louisiana in particular, we also have
19 drinking water systems that are not operating. We
20 also have waste water treatment systems that are not
21 operating. So all of those issues are of concern to
22 us and we have a multi-pronged approach to try to
23 address all of those.

24 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Anyone from the
25 room?

26 PARTICIPANT: Hi, I'm -- from Nature. You

1 mentioned several plans and several of your Science
2 Advisory Boards. Can you clarify? Is this all one
3 board and who is on it and is it all one plan and when
4 will we see it?

5 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: The SAB is on
6 the website.

7 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Yes. The SAB,
8 we called on experts in water. So there are water
9 experts. We called on SAB air experts. We called on
10 SAB sediment experts. So they're not the same people
11 necessarily and as soon as we get their comments and
12 plans put in place, we certainly will be sharing them
13 with everybody.

14 PARTICIPANT: Mr. Johnson.

15 MR. BROWN: I have a question on the
16 phone.

17 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Go ahead.

18 MR. BROWN: This is David Brown from *The*
19 *Washington Post*. Can you tell me, Mr. Johnson, how
20 the water results compare to results from other high
21 water events, rain events in the past? In other
22 words, is this very historically very different now
23 from past storms and floods?

24 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Well, it's my
25 understanding that the two that make this unique are
26 the high bacterial counts and the fact that we're also

1 seeing high levels of lead. But again, these are
2 among our preliminary results. We're doing and
3 continue to do a lot of flood water analysis. So
4 again, it's too difficult to speculate on what it may
5 look like in the end.

6 MS. BARINGER: Yes. Felicity Baringer
7 from *The New York Times*. Yesterday Major Nagin in New
8 Orleans said that he was receiving a report from you
9 and gave a very upbeat account of the likelihood of
10 being able to get people and businesses back in the
11 central business district and the French Quarter and
12 some of the areas that had remained dry. Give to me a
13 sense of in terms of your recommendations to local
14 officials what kinds of readings are you looking to
15 get down to on E. coli, hazmat, lead and some of the
16 other category of pollutants before you declare a
17 neighborhood or a city or any part of the hurricane-
18 effected area safe for human habitation.

19 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: A very
20 important question and first, all of us across all the
21 Federal agencies, EPA included, want New Orleans to
22 return to be the thriving city it was before the
23 hurricane. Our top priority is to assess what the
24 impacts are and to conduct a clean-up operation just
25 as quickly as possible that's done right and proactive
26 for public health.

1 Restoring this community is not just in
2 EPA. It really is a collaborative effort and it's a
3 collaborative effort among our Federal agencies
4 whether the Federal agencies be helping with services,
5 CDC in particular, whether it be Federal agencies such
6 as HUD, others. And the states have a key role to
7 play in both the assessment as well as providing
8 recommendations to the local, in this case, mayor,
9 both the state departments of health as well as the
10 state departments of environmental quality.

11 This is not city only or a Federal only.
12 It really is a collaborative effort and has to be that
13 way. So we are partnering with our Federal and our
14 state partners to provide advice and counsel. At this
15 point as you can see from the briefing that I've just
16 gone through, we have many questions. We also have
17 many concerns.

18 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: A question on
19 the phone.

20 MS. HOGUE: This is Cheryl Hogue with
21 *Chemical and Engineering News*. Mr. Johnson, I'm
22 wondering if EPA has the money to do all the things
23 that it has and whether you'll be asking Congress for
24 some more money.

25 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: At this point
26 through FEMA, we have received in excess of \$100

1 million. Part of that money has been moved through us
2 to the Coast Guard to assist in oil spills and some of
3 the activities that both of us jointly participate in.

4 At this point, we have sufficient funds.

5 But again, as I said, we're in the early
6 days of assessment and we don't know what that
7 assessment will show. Certainly I have instructed our
8 staff if there are any resource issues to make those
9 known to me immediately. But now, we have sufficient
10 resources to do what we are doing.

11 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Can everyone
12 please mute your phone? We're going to go to the room
13 real quick. Please mute your phone and then we'll
14 come back to the phone. Elizabeth

15 ELIZABETH: Yes. I have a question about
16 the sediment because there's a lot of hydrocarbons in
17 a lot of petroleum products. Does it pose a risk to
18 those people as they come or to the rescue workers?
19 Is that a toxic product and what do you do about that?

20 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: We are just
21 now beginning to characterize what's in the sediment.

22 Clearly from the pictures, they are petroleum-based
23 products. We don't know what else in the petroleum-
24 based products or what's the nature of the petroleum-
25 based product. It's very difficult to advise. Again
26 given what we see, we certainly would advise a great

1 deal of caution and taking prudent caution of changing
2 clothes and doing things like that. But until we know
3 what we're dealing with it's really difficult to
4 advise very specifically.

5 Again what we did in the water is we know
6 there's high levels of bacteria. We know there's a
7 high levels of lead. We're seeing a mixture of other
8 kinds of chemicals. The water is unsafe. Flood
9 waters are unsafe. So you need to avoid as much as
10 possible exposure to it.

11 JIM: Jim -- from *The Wall Street Journal*.

12 Mr. Johnson, how long do you think it will take to do
13 all the sampling and testing needed to determine for
14 sure the environmental threats and will the same kind
15 of test be conducted in residential areas as well as
16 industrial?

17 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: I don't know
18 the answer. And the reason I don't know the answer is
19 there are a number of issues that we're doing real
20 time. Again, this is a snapshot. The flood waters
21 are receding. That's good news. So as long as the
22 flood waters are there, we're going to continue
23 sampling the water.

24 The sediment, we'll be doing sediment
25 samples and again, some of the areas we can't get into
26 sediment until the flood waters are gone. So we're

1 going to do the sediment. We need, again, to sort
2 through what needs to be done for these superfund
3 sites, what additional analysis do we need to do to
4 assure ourselves that those superfund sites or the
5 areas have not been breached.

6 So there are many of those kinds of
7 questions that we don't know the answer to and we're
8 in the early days of going around and visually
9 inspecting and then beginning to do more detailed
10 analysis like we are for flood waters and sediment.

11 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: Room.

12 MR. CORSON: Paul Corson with CNN Radio.
13 We're recording in Atlanta right now so if folks could
14 mute for just a second. Mr. Johnson, the chemical
15 corridor known as Cancer Alley, is it possible that
16 there are tanks and pipelines leaking right now that
17 you don't know about and creating a hazard?

18 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: We're not
19 aware. We're doing everything we can to try and
20 assess that situation as I said through some of our
21 technology, the ASPECT aircraft where we can actually
22 use infrared technology to look at tanks or other
23 kinds of technology that we can use and we're
24 deploying those to see. We're certainly not aware of
25 those.

26 Again, there are a number of chemical

1 facilities in this area as one of the charts indicates
2 and we know that the individual owners of those, the
3 company, are going in to do their own assessments. So
4 we're all working very cooperatively to try to do an
5 assessment. If we knew there was a problem, we would
6 be there to try to stop it and mitigate it as quickly
7 as possible.

8 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: One more
9 question.

10 (Several speak at once.)

11 PARTICIPANT: Administrator Johnson, can
12 you please give us any sense of what sort of a
13 timeline we'd be looking at for the actual
14 environmental remediation efforts that could be going
15 on after the sampling is all done? Are we looking at
16 maybe five years, ten years, that all of this work
17 would take to be done?

18 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: I wish I could
19 speculate on what it's going to take. Again, what
20 we're focused on now is assessing what the impacts
21 are. Until we have a better handle on what's the
22 magnitude, the extent, of the problem, again whether
23 it's sediment, whether it's water, whether it's debris
24 issues or whether it's air issues, it really is
25 impossible to speculate on what it's going to take and
26 what time it's going to take.

1 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: I think just
2 hold on. We're going to go ahead and give a statement
3 for radio. Do you want to just read that?

4 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Again, thank
5 you for joining me this afternoon. I just want to
6 assure the public that EPA is on the scene. We
7 prepositioned people before the storm. We're on the
8 scene now. We're doing everything that we can do to
9 ensure that the water, the land and the air is
10 restored.

11 That's our focus and we have multiple
12 efforts to help ensure that that's the case from
13 cleaning up the water, doing flood water sampling,
14 providing advice and counsel, dealing with debris,
15 dealing with hazardous materials, dealing with
16 potential air issues. We're on the scene making sure
17 again working collaboratively with the state and
18 federal partners to make sure that the land, the water
19 and the air is restored.

20 PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: -- tape this for
21 a minute while we go out to the -

22 PARTICIPANT: Could you restate what you
23 said about drinking water in the original thing
24 because I don't have that on the recording?

25 EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: Sure. There
26 are literally hundreds of community drinking water

1 systems throughout the affected hurricane area. In
2 some cases, they are not operating because they don't
3 have electricity. In other cases, there is more --

4 (Taping ends.)

5 (Administrator hung line up and no sound
6 coming through.)

7 PARTICIPANT: Why didn't they mention that
8 they were hanging up?

9 PARTICIPANT: They were doing the TV
10 stuff. So maybe there was too much noise.

11 PARTICIPANT: I thought they went to radio
12 next.

13 PARTICIPANT: Well, they had somebody
14 recording some TV I thought.

15 PARTICIPANT: Okay.

16 PARTICIPANT: She interrupted and said
17 they won't go to radio because they'd gone over their
18 time limit. And they were recording a couple of
19 things for radio and TV and that's when it cut off.

20 PARTICIPANT: -- terrible because we had
21 people typing and talking.

22 PARTICIPANT: I know. They hang -- It was
23 terrible.

24 PARTICIPANT: It's not broadcast quality.

25 PARTICIPANT: Right. Well, none of us got
26 our questions answered either.

1 PARTICIPANT: No.

2 PARTICIPANT: That's it.

3 PARTICIPANT: You folks have a great day.

4 PARTICIPANT: You too.

5 PARTICIPANT: Bye.

6 PARTICIPANT: Bye.

7 (End of tape.)

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