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Environmentalists: Tests Show High Levels of Formaldehyde Found in FEMA Trailers

The Associated Press

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Gulfport, Mississippi - An environmental group says thousands of Hurricane Katrina victims in Mississippi and Louisiana may be living in unsafe conditions after tests it conducted showed dangerous levels of formaldehyde in some government trailers.

The Sierra Club on Wednesday asked for a congressional hearing after it claimed that 30 out of 32 Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers it tested had levels of formaldehyde that were unsafe.

"We started doing this testing because people were getting sick, having nosebleeds and having constant coughs," said Mississippi Sierra Club spokeswoman Becky Gillette. "The government is making people sick. They are putting people back in harm's way."

Gillette said the Sierra Club inserted vapor monitors in 50 trailers, though it said it had only gotten results back from a Florida lab on 32 of the tests. Formaldehyde concentrations were reported within a range of 0.06 to 0.34 parts per million in the air.

Formaldehyde is a widely used industrial chemical. The colorless, pungent gas can irritate eyes, nose and throat, and cause difficulty breathing and nausea at levels above .1 part per million in the air, officials say.

It is also known to cause cancer in the upper throat, the International Agency for Research on Cancer said.

"It is important that we don't discount these symptoms," said Mary DeVany, a certified industrial hygienist. "Almost all of the concentrations that we measured were 10 to 100 times higher than the worst smog levels in Los Angeles."

DeVany recommended that people living in the trailers increase ventilation inside by running fans, keeping windows open and controlling humidity levels.

"If you can smell it, you are being overexposed," DeVany said.

The 2005 hurricane season marked the largest deployment of temporary housing in FEMA's history, including some 30,000 trailers in Mississippi alone.

"FEMA is steadfastly committed to serving disaster victims and continuing to help Gulf states communities get back on their feet," agency spokesman Aaron Walker wrote in an e-mail to The Sun Herald. "FEMA and industry experts are monitoring the small number of cases where odors of formaldehyde have been reported, and we are confident that there is no ongoing risk."

"The odor may result from several sources, including materials used in the construction of certain trailers and vapors from items like new linens and burning cigarettes. By fully opening windows and using air conditioning or exhaust fans, residents can ensure proper air ventilation in their homes," Walker said.

Sierra Club spokesman Chris Smith said people living in FEMA trailers and suffering from the effects of formaldehyde, "have a right to know what is happening to them."

"We have thousands of people living in FEMA trailers. Some people just endure because they have no choice," Smith said.