

Editorial

Over the short span of two months, we have experienced a renewed appreciation for the awesome power of nature, and how it can leave its catastrophic mark on a region, wipe out entire communities, and tear apart families. Throughout my three trips to the Gulf Coast, I have witnessed unfathomable destruction, from which it will take us years to recover. In Gulf Port, Mississippi, and its surrounding towns, I saw wreckage that stretched as far as the eye could see - casino barges thrown on shore, whole pieces of highways ripped away, and structures flattened to their foundations. In New Orleans, Louisiana, I saw and smelled the results of a city flooded with putrid water. And in Alabama, I observed the end product of a 30-foot storm surge that deposited an entire shrimp boat in the middle of a forest a half-mile from shore.

Under “normal” emergency response protocols, EPA’s primary responsibility is to identify and mitigate environmental hazards. However, it was obvious that these were not normal circumstances. While EPA’s mission has always been to protect American lives, rescuing people from flood waters is not normally in our job description. Soon after Hurricane Katrina struck, we began using our 60 watercraft, which had been pre-deployed for environmental monitoring, as search and rescue vessels. I am proud of our employees who worked tirelessly to save more than 800 people in New Orleans.

After the search and rescue missions were completed, EPA then turned its full attention to our responsibilities for identifying potential environmental risks, assisting with the restoration of the drinking and wastewater infrastructure, and addressing hazardous releases and oil spills. Knowing that time was not on our side, I directed EPA to immediately begin our sampling efforts. As always, all of our samples went through a rigorous analysis and quality control process. And in order to ensure that our sampling process was based on sound science, I requested EPA’s independent Science Advisory Board to review our plans and make recommendations.

Transparency is important in all EPA’s work - especially in the case of disasters. The hurricanes have highlighted the challenge of providing information that is timely, accurate, and useful - especially to other decision-makers. Consequently, I committed EPA to releasing sampling data as soon as it was verified - and we have done that. Through press conferences, press releases, safety advisories, and Web site postings, EPA continues to help in providing our federal, state, and local partners with the information they need concerning the potential hazards during the recovery and repopulation process.

Decisionmakers are not the only ones who rely on our sound scientific information - so does the public. The hurricanes have forced a large number of people to relocate, and reaching them has been no small communications challenge. EPA has distributed over one million flyers, in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, to both residents and responders on potential environmental and health hazards resulting from the hurricanes. We have also reached out to the media, including local, regional and national television stations, and have contacted over 900 radio stations in the impacted states to offer public service announcements and participated in daily radio announcements.

Looking ahead, much remains to be done to help address the public health and environmental impacts of the hurricanes. The safe management of debris remains a high priority, and the Agency will assist the U.S. Corps of Engineers and state and local officials as they move forward on debris removal. This challenge is enormous. Of the estimated 124 million cubic yards of debris throughout Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, 48 million cubic yards have been collected to date. 350,000 vehicles were estimated to be damaged or destroyed in Louisiana alone. And EPA has already supervised the collection of over one million pounds of hazardous materials. For its part, the Agency will strive to provide sound scientific and practical advice on proper debris disposal practices.

EPA will also continue to work to support our partners' efforts to repair and restore public facilities including drinking water, wastewater, and waste treatment facilities. As anyone who has visited the region can relate - restorations, either full or partial, will take time. While most wastewater systems in the affected areas are operational, a few are only providing limited treatment, and many are still experiencing significant problems with collection systems.

We will also continue to monitor air, water, and sediment quality in the region and make sure that this information is readily available to officials, responders and the public. We expect that citizens and government agencies will continue to look to EPA and our federal partners for technical expertise, scientifically sound data,

and practical advice on environmental and public health conditions in the region. We are focused on meeting that challenge.

My recent visits to the hurricane-ravaged areas have reminded me that the Gulf Coast region is not just an area of immense environmental challenges - it is the place where many EPA employees call home. As local communities undertake the task of reviving their economies, EPA will stand side-by-side our federal, state, and local partners to help the citizens of the Gulf Coast rebuild their homes, their businesses, and their lives.

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