DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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State, federal agencies summarize Hurricane Katrina sampling, recycling, clean-up efforts

BATON ROUGE – Thousands of analyses of water and sediment samples show the majority of New Orleans' environment is back to pre-Katrina levels, according to doctors and scientists from state and federal agencies.

The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency presented data gathered after Katrina on this and other storm-related topics at a meeting today at New Orleans City Hall.

"There was no toxic gumbo after the storm and there was no toxic sediment," said DEQ Toxicologist Tom Harris. "We have sampling results and state and federal scientists agree that there were some localized areas that contained elevated levels of some pollutants. However, it is safe to say that environmentally, New Orleans is back to its pre-Katrina levels.'

Dr. Raoult Ratard, State Epidemiologist, said there was no increase in reportable diseases because of Hurricanes Katrina or Rita. After the storm, there were rumors of possible epidemics of diseases such as malaria and cholera.

Ratard explained that these diseases are not common in south Louisiana and would not begin occurring in the area because of a storm. He said, based on statistics tracking hospital and doctor visits throughout Louisiana that there were no outbreaks or illnesses that seemed out of the ordinary.

Nancy Jones, EPA's Incident Commander headquartered in New Orleans, discussed the monumental sampling efforts related to cleaning up after the storms. She said more than 700,000 electronic items and more than 400,000 white goods have been collected. Also, more than 10,000 tons of household hazardous waste have been collected and disposed of properly.

DEQ Assistant Secretary Chuck Brown discussed debris management. He said there are 402 approved sites in the state -- 216 for Katrina debris and 186 for Rita debris. These sites serve several purposes. Some are used for chipping and grinding, while others are used as staging areas and others for disposal of construction and demolition debris.

Brown also said that there are 30,000 homes that are tagged for demolition. This would create to 7.2 million tons, or 18 million cubic yards, of debris. As more homes are demolished, the cleanup efforts would take more time based on the number of landfills in use and their locations.

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