

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

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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.

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

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

PARTICIPANT: Yes, how do we ask questions?

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

PARTICIPANT: How do we ask questions?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

PRESS SECRETARY WITCHER: A question on the phone.

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

EPA ADMINISTRATOR JOHNSON: At this point 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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