



Statement of Tina Kreisher
Director of Communications, the Department of the Interior
Before the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Oversight Hearing on
The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Response to Air Quality Issues Arising from the
Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001
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Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Franks, members of the subcommittee, my name is Tina Kreisher and I serve as Director of Communications at the Department of the Interior. I have been at Interior since February, 2002 and have served two Secretaries, Gale Norton and now Dirk Kempthorne.

In September, it will be a full six years since the events of 9/11 and the time I worked at the Environmental Protection Agency. More than three months after the catastrophic event, I left EPA for extensive foot surgery and then moved to a new position at Interior. I left behind all of my files and have had only the August 2003 report by the EPA's inspector general to refresh my memory.

Much has been said about the adequacy of the processes being used by EPA to test for air quality after the monumental destruction of the terrorist attack. Yet the tests are the same as those used by the Clinton administration and for a few months by the Bush administration to test for air quality in the city of New York and elsewhere. It was the standard being used by EPA. As a political appointee, I was not, and others were not, scientists. We relied on the professionals to guide us through the testing procedures and processes. When we were told the tests showed air quality within normal range, we accepted those findings.

My memory is of our New York office, located just blocks from ground zero and the stories of staff members scooping up dust samples as they ran from the maelstrom on that day. And of their returning to work there just a few short weeks after the attack.

There seems to be a perception by some that we accepted these test results because we had a disregard for the people living in the city. There is no basis to that perception. I remember being in the office as Administrator Christie Todd Whitman heard from her son, who was in one of the buildings at the World Trade Center. He called and she told him to get out of the building, which he did. But then it was agonizing hours before he called to tell her he was safe.

My oldest daughter was an attorney in New York at the Cravath law firm and she lived near the theater district. She was there on 9/11 and breathed the air for two years before she moved from the city.

There was no disregard for the people who had suffered and were suffering either on a personal or professional level.

Administrator Whitman wanted complete transparency for the test monitoring, and it was at her suggestion that we put the testing results on line for the press and the public and other scientists to see and evaluate.

She also wanted more press releases. That brings me to a section of the IG report that is critical of the press releases. I have been writing press releases in this town for more than 18 years and it has always been a cumbersome process. In my experience, when the release has a Congressman's or Senator's name at the top, usually he or she has edited it. At Interior, we have an approval process that sometimes takes minutes from the Secretary or hours from a detailed review process involving many people.

The press release approval process that was set up after 9/11 was taking days and sometimes a week. There were many considerations and many questions being asked, and debate swirled on conference calls set up, at least in part, by the Council on Environmental Quality under the auspices of the National Security Council. Could EPA speak to health risks? Who was the lead for getting information out? What was our statutory obligation?

The IG's report, in fact, said, "These statutes and regulations do not obligate EPA to respond to a given emergency, allowing for local agencies to lead a response, and New York City in fact exercised a lead role regarding indoor air."

We were told on conference calls that EPA should continue testing and let the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, the city and state of New York, and the Department of Health and Human Services discuss human health. I understand that OSHA did provide guidance at ground zero.

The point has been made many times that there are more effective ways to get information to the press

than by press release. In fact, I rarely see the content of press releases in actual press reports. Reporters prefer to do their own reporting and not copy what is being given to everyone. Because of the cumbersome approval process, I opted to do fewer releases and instead spoke personally to almost every reporter who called. This meant 20 to 30 interviews a day for just information from me and then a number of requests for live interviews with Administrator Whitman.

I think reporters would confirm that we were forthcoming with information during the period—if we had the information to give them.

I will add one other thing. In all the years I have been writing press releases, I have never knowingly put false information into a release. While editing changes were made based on recommendations by the Council on Environmental Quality, I believed those changes to be upsetting in some cases, but not false. I still believe that to be true.

The IG's report, in fact, had this to say: "We spoke to a number of experts in the field of environmental monitoring, including physicians, industrial hygienists, and researchers. These experts generally agreed that the levels of airborne asbestos detected in the air outside the perimeter of Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan did not present a significant increase in long-term health risk to the public."

I will be happy to take your questions.