

Hurricane Aftermath

Checking For Toxics

No tainted runoff found in Gulf; concerns focus on sediments left by floods

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Gulf of Mexico waters thus far appear free of chemical contaminants that could have been washed from the land by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, state and federal scientists report.

Steven A. Murawski, a senior scientist for the [National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration](#), says federal and state agencies are sampling Gulf waters to determine whether the two hurricanes swept pollutants from land into coastal waters. Water samples analyzed thus far contain no toxic chemicals attributable to runoff following the hurricanes, he says.

As part of their analyses, scientists are checking coastal waters from eastern Texas to Alabama for the presence of brominated flame retardants, which Murawski says is an indicator of "acute urban runoff." Thus far, scientists have detected none of these brominated compounds in Gulf waters, he says. It is likely, therefore, that the low levels of pesticides and polychlorinated biphenyls found in the water did not come from the storm surges, Murawski adds.

Meanwhile, on Oct. 20 public health officials said at an [Institute of Medicine \(IOM\)](#) conference that, currently, the greatest potential threat to human health in the wake of the hurricanes may be exposure to mold. They also expressed concerns about the toxicity of the sediments coating formerly flooded areas, especially in New Orleans.

Among IOM conference speakers was Paul J. Lioy, a professor at [Robert Wood Johnson Medical School](#), Piscataway, N.J., who has extensively studied health effects stemming from the World Trade Center attacks, including ailments linked to dusts that coated building interiors. Noting that sediments dry out and can end up as airborne dust, Lioy urged officials to analyze the sediments as soon as possible.

"Know what's in there," he said, so returning residents and workers doing demolition and cleanup can be told how to protect themselves appropriately.