

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

July 1, 2010

Administrator Martha Johnson
U.S. General Services Administration
1800 F Street NW
Washington, DC 20405-0001

Dear Administrator Johnson:

Today, the *New York Times*¹ reported that hundreds of formaldehyde-contaminated trailers that were previously provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to victims of Hurricane Katrina and Rita are now being repurposed as living quarters for workers involved in clean up efforts of the BP deepwater Horizon Oil spill.

These trailers were first procured by FEMA in summer 2005 to shelter and house displaced residents from the severe hurricanes that affected thousands of residents of the Gulf States. In 2006, claims arose that units were contaminated with high levels of formaldehyde, which posed a particular problem for the 'travel trailers' which are equipped with less capable ventilation systems than mobile home trailers. Formaldehyde, which was used as a component of the pressed wood in the construction of the trailers, is highly toxic when inhaled and is a known carcinogen. Despite the fact that these travel trailers are designed only as temporary living quarters and for recreational purposes, many displaced residents were using these trailers as long term shelter and as a consequence, were highly exposed to the toxic formaldehyde fumes.

After numerous reports of serious health concerns for those residing in these trailers and after federal substantiation of these claims by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), FEMA halted distribution of the remaining unused units.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/01/us/01trailers.html?hp>

Earlier this year, in an attempt to recoup taxpayer funds, FEMA, working with the General Services Administration (GSA), sold over 100,000 trailers through the public auction process. Many of these trailers were sold to companies and individuals located in Louisiana and other Gulf states.

It is our understanding that as part of the sale of these trailers, GSA took steps to educate and inform potential buyers and users about the contamination of the trailers with hazardous formaldehyde and required all buyers to sign contracts that the trailers would not be used as housing. Despite these safeguards, according to the *New York Times* article², dozens of the trailers have been sold or otherwise provided to unwitting workers who are flocking to the Gulf to fill the jobs being offered by disaster relief firms. We are concerned that workers who are being exposed to toxic oil fumes during their cleanup efforts are now returning after a long day of work to sleep in a toxic, formaldehyde contaminated trailer.

We therefore ask that you respond to the following requests for information.

1. Please provide the Subcommittee with documentation regarding all sales of the formaldehyde-contaminated trailers. In each case, were all of the trailers sold in compliance with GSA's requirement (1) that the purchaser sign an agreement that the trailer would not be used for housing, (2) that the trailers clearly display a label reading "Not to be used as housing", and (3) that the purchaser read documentation about the impacts of formaldehyde exposure?
2. Has GSA found any auctioned trailers that were purchased without the required signed agreement?
3. Has GSA discovered any of these auctioned trailers in which owners have failed to label the trailer as being unfit for habitation or have removed the required labeling?
4. How is GSA ensuring that secondary sales of these auctioned trailers are conforming to the original GSA requirements?
5. Has GSA determined if these trailers are indeed being used as temporary housing facilities as has been reported in the *New York Times* Article? If so, what is GSA going to do to protect the health and wellbeing of workers who are responding to the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico? If GSA is making no such efforts, why not?

Thank you for your assistance and cooperation in responding to this request. Should you have any questions, please have your staff contact Dr. Michal Freedhoff of the Subcommittee staff, or Dr. Avenel Joseph of Mr. Markey's staff at 202-225-2836 or Chris DeBosier of Mr. Melancon's staff at 202-225-4031.

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/01/us/01trailers.html?hp>

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
Chairman
Energy and Environment Subcommittee



Charlie Melancon
Member
Energy and Environment Subcommittee

CC: Honorable Henry Waxman, Chairman
Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member
Honorable Fred Upton, Ranking Member