

HURRICANE RECOVERY

FEMA sells trailers despite formaldehyde concerns

Agency plans air quality tests

By Shelia Byrd
Associated Press Writer

JACKSON, Miss. — The Federal Emergency Management Agency plans to keep selling and donating surplus disaster relief trailers despite concerns that they may have unhealthy levels of formaldehyde, the agency said.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Health Affairs plan to test the air quality in the trailers.

"Potential buyers/recipients will be fully advised of the concerns regarding formaldehyde levels in travel trailers," FEMA spokesman Aaron Walker said Friday in an e-mail message to The Associated Press.

FEMA drew the ire of

Congress this past week after documents revealed the agency's lawyers discouraged investigating reports that the trailers had high formaldehyde levels.

Formaldehyde, a common preservative and embalming fluid, sometimes is found in building materials that are used in manufactured homes. The chemical can cause respiratory problems and possibly cancer in high doses or with prolonged exposure.

FEMA provided about 120,000 travel trailers to victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. More than 56,000 of them are still occupied in Mississippi and Louisiana, and others are being held in reserve for future

disasters, Walker said.

"Before FEMA sells any more of these or gives these to people ... each trailer needs to be tested. If it comes in over the limit, it shouldn't be sold or given away until the formaldehyde is remediated," said Becky Gillette of the Mississippi chapter of the Sierra Club.

CDC officials are traveling to New Orleans for a "very preliminary fact-finding" meeting Tuesday with FEMA officials, said centers spokeswoman Dagny Olivares.

The CDC delegation will include at least one medical epidemiologist.

Olivares couldn't say when the CDC plans to start testing the air quality in FEMA trailers.

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FEMA spokesman



TIM MUELLER/ The Associated Press

Don Kehoe of LEC Maintenance makes a call from the top of a FEMA trailer at Renaissance Village Friday in Baker. Kehoe was checking the air conditioning unit on the trailer.

"It depends on how the study is designed," she said. "Everybody is working with the utmost urgency."

FEMA has disposed of 18,562 travel trailers "through authorized disposal methods," Walker said. The General Services Administration handles the sale or donation of the trailers.

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University looking at several options

said.

Katrice Albert, Vice Provost for Equity, Diversity, and Community Outreach, could not be reached for comment by press time Monday.

Jessica Ketchum Weber, president of the women and gender studies graduate organization, said the committee discussed three specific options for the future of the two buildings.

One option was to make no changes to the existing facilities and have the new complex built without integrating the existing structures.

One poorly received prospect, Weber said, was to have the two centers move to new space in the Union.

Because the new parking development is not just a simple parking garage, another option was to have representatives from the centers sit down with architects and come up with a design for a new space incorporated within the structure, Weber said.

The new development will be similar to the Main Street Market development downtown, Weber said.

Weber said she thinks the University is working openly to try and find a solution that represents everyone's interests.

Weber will host a meeting with the three other student representatives on the committee in a town hall

style meeting to gather feedback and suggestions from students. The meeting will be held on Thursday at 7 p.m. in the African American Cultural Center.

Westley Bayas, AACC advocate and committee member, said he thought a plan to integrate the two centers with the new complex is "something that needs to be considered."

But Bayas also said he thinks his

constituents are concerned about not receiving promises made by the University.

"The University needs to give us the plans, and show us how it's integrated," Bayas said.

The committee will assemble again Aug. 9.

Contact Mark Macmurdo at
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