

New Orleans: An underwater “Love Canal”?

Submerged landfills and contaminated debris

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News reports of the humanitarian crisis in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina – evacuations, looting, flooded streets — has somewhat sidelined the story of the pollution that will pose one of the greatest challenges to any cleanup and reconstruction of the City of New Orleans.

More than a century ago, Mark Twain remarked that New Orleans residents can have neither “cellars or graves, the town being built upon ‘made’ ground; so they do without both, and few of the living complain, and none of the others.”

Because it lies below sea level, New Orleans major cemeteries inter their residents aboveground. In flash floods, coffins have been known to float out of their crypts and sail down the street.

Project that same dynamic onto buried waste and a dire situation emerges. There are centuries-old landfills in New Orleans, and it can be argued that much of the city itself is a landfill, since ash, garbage and debris were mixed with dirt and sand to fill in many areas.

The implications are fairly obvious for soil and structures of standing for weeks or months in water contaminated with raw sewage, dead animal carcasses, and industrial wastes from such places as gas stations. In some areas of the city (especially the north near Lake Pontchartrain) almost every house and building — their wall studs and drywall, flooring and ceiling joists — will be destroyed by rain, rot, and toxic mould and mildew. The foundations will sink into the fill made sloppy by the standing water.

Much of what is left once the water is gone will have to be bulldozed and hauled away, to God-knows-what landfill or incinerator large enough to take it all in. Regular garbage disposal is enough of a challenge: imagine disposing of a whole city! It's likely that waste management and site restoration contractors are already making plans for large-scale salvage and disposal operations — a potential multi-billion-dollar windfall for them.

Another challenge lurks that's almost too terrible to contemplate. The upper layer of soil across huge areas of the city may be too contaminated for human exposure according to U.S. EPA standards; two feet or more of it may have to be scraped away and replaced with imported clean fill.

Consider just one example of why this may be so.

The Agriculture Street Landfill (ASL) is situated on a 95-acre site in New Orleans' Orleans Parish. The ASL is a notorious site, sort of a local “Love Canal.” The ASL site is three miles

south of Lake Pontchartrain and about 2.5 north-northeast of the city's central business district (roughly halfway between the old French Quarter and the lake). It's also in the pathway of flood waters from the collapsed section of the Industrial Canal Levee.

The ASL is a federally registered Superfund site, and is on the National Priorities List of highly contaminated sites requiring cleanup and containment. A few years ago the site (or at least the parts not sitting under houses and a school that were built atop it after the landfill closed decades ago) was scraped two feet down and covered with clean soil.

Pointing to a high incidence of cancer and other diseases, residents were not satisfied and have lobbied for years to be relocated. Activists note that the site contains not only almost a hundred years worth of municipal garbage but also industrial wastes such as what would be produced by service stations, dry cleaners and manufacturers. The site was routinely sprayed with DDT in the 1940s and 50s and, in 1962, 300,000 cubic yards of excess fill were removed from ASL because of ongoing subsurface fires. (The site was commonly referred to as "Dante's Inferno.")

Now the ASL site sits under three feet of water. The potential for contaminants to rise and migrate through the flood waters to other areas is real. It's likely that the multi-million dollar site restoration conducted a few years ago has been compromised, perhaps even rendered worthless.

Extensive testing will determine the contamination levels and restoration requirements across the city. But it's enough to make one wonder if it's not time to move on. Perhaps the charming and historic French Quarter can be preserved — being the original town, it sits on the highest ground. The new homes and buildings that will be required in any case could be built further inland, and the low-lying flooded and contaminated northern parts of the city put to some other use.

It's a terrible thing to contemplate, but not as terrible as future storm, more broken levees, and having to go through all of this once more.

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