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OSHA and EPA urge employers, workers, homeowners and others to protect themselves during flood cleanup

NEW YORK – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are urging employers, workers and members of the public engaged in flood clean-up activities in New York and New Jersey to be aware of the hazards they might encounter and the steps they should take to protect themselves.

“We want to ensure that employers do not put their workers at risk, and workers and the general public are aware of the hazards involved in flood cleanup work. Taking precautions is necessary to prevent serious injury and illness or even death,” said Robert Kulick, OSHA’s regional administrator in New York.

“As people clean up their homes, they should avoid direct contact with floodwater due to potentially elevated levels of contamination associated with raw sewage and other hazardous substances that may be in floodwater,” said EPA Regional Administrator Judith A. Enck. “People should also separate household hazardous waste such as paints, cleaners, oils, batteries and pesticides from the rest of their garbage so that these potentially hazardous items can be properly disposed of through programs being set up by local authorities, state and the EPA.”

Employers, workers, homeowners and the general public entering buildings or structures to remove floodwaters or to clean up as a result of flooding must assess the potential for hazardous conditions and/or exposures before performing these activities. Based on that initial assessment, employers must ensure that workers, at a minimum, are provided with education on the hazards that they are exposed to and how they can protect themselves. Employers need to provide their employees with appropriate personal protective equipment and training to safeguard them against these hazards.

It is important to remember that, in most cases, the cleanup of previously flooded materials in a residential home will not require the same level of protection as the cleanup of a business where hazardous chemicals are present. Businesses should evaluate the chemical hazards in their workplaces, starting with reviewing the inventory of chemicals that is part of a workplace’s hazard communication program. Another step is to utilize the assistance of a safety and health professional.

OSHA’s Hazard Exposure and Risk Assessment Matrix – which is available at <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/hurricane/index.html> – provides information on many of the tasks and operations associated with disaster response and recovery, and the most common and significant hazards that response and recovery workers might encounter. The matrix is designed to help employers make decisions during their risk assessment that will protect their workers doing work in hurricane-impacted areas.

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Additional resources include:

- OSHA - Keeping Workers Safe During Hurricane Sandy Cleanup and Recovery: <http://www.osha.gov/sandy>.
- OSHA – Flood Response and Recovery: <http://www.osha.gov/dts/weather/flood/response.html>.
- EPA - Hurricane Sandy Response and Recovery: <http://www.epa.gov/sandy>.
- FEMA – Ready.gov: <http://www.ready.gov/hurricanes>.
- National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences – <http://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/index.cfm?id=2472>.
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health – <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/emres/flood.html>.
- U.S. Department of Labor - Hurricane Recovery Assistance: <http://www.dol.gov/opa/hurricane-recovery.htm>

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