



New York City Environmental Justice Alliance

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Citywide Environmental Justice coalition calls on Mayor and Governor to protect low income waterfront communities from toxic exposures during future hurricane storm surges

New York, NY (August 29, 2011) – The New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) applauds the Bloomberg and Cuomo Administrations for their Hurricane Irene disaster preparations. We are relieved that our fellow New Yorkers are safe and that the damage to our City appears to be manageable. However, NYC-EJA remains concerned that toxic environmental risks remain for the next major storm, particularly in waterfront low-income communities of color. NYC-EJA urges the Mayor and Governor to take assertive steps to minimize the toxic contamination risk exposures that face these communities – risks posed by outdated waterfront policies and inadequate data collection.

For over a year, NYC-EJA has highlighted the threats presented by the Significant Maritime and Industrial Areas (SMIA) zones. SMIA are zones created by the NYC Waterfront Revitalization Program, which encourage the concentration of heavy industrial uses and polluting infrastructure in six neighborhoods: Sunset Park, Newtown Creek, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Red Hook, the South Bronx and Staten Island's North Shore.

These communities are not only clustered with the City's heaviest industrial and infrastructure uses – they all also happen to be in storm surge zones. Storm surge zones (now popularly known as Zone A) are waterfront properties most at risk for water surges, flooding and inundation during nor'easters, hurricanes and tropical storms. The City of New York has not analyzed the cumulative contamination exposure risks associated with clusters of heavy industrial uses in such vulnerable locations. Moreover, the SMIA communities are also populated with some of the City's poorest residents, New Yorkers saddled with numerous public health burdens, from asthma and other respiratory diseases to inadequate health insurance coverage.

As with Hurricane Katrina, the great concern is that storm surges could sweep through these clusters of heavy industry and infrastructure, spreading unsecured heavy chemicals throughout these waterfront communities – and beyond – leaving brownfields and worse in their wake. Two of NYC's federal Superfund sites are within and adjacent to SMIA's

– and they are not the only toxic exposure threats. The attached map shows an overlay of the SMIA zones with EPA’s Toxic Release Inventories, which are reports of toxic chemical releases to the local environment. Among the hazardous substances found in the TRI reports are toxic chemicals such as dioxin, acetone and sodium hydroxide – materials that could leave significant solid and water contamination, if they are swept upland via storm surges.

NYC was lucky that Hurricane Irene was only a Category 1 hurricane that devolved into a tropical storm as it arrived in the City. However, we cannot rely solely on luck. To protect New Yorkers from the cumulative risk exposures posed by SMIA clusters of heavy chemical uses in storm surge zones, City and State government must enact reforms of these zones in the upcoming Waterfront Revitalization Program amendment process. To their credit, the Bloomberg Administration acknowledged in its waterfront plan Vision 2020 the challenges to community resiliency that SMIA’s present, and have expressed a desire to grapple with these issues. Governor Cuomo is reviewing NYS’s draft Climate Action Plan which, when approved, can help reduce some of the toxic risk exposures emanating from climate change.

Finally, on the 50th Anniversary of NYC’s 1961 Zoning Resolution, it is time to look at how the City’s performance standards – which have been updated in 50 years and predate the nation’s environmental laws of the 70’s – can be given a 21st Century overhaul and brought to bear on this threat.

(For more information on SMIA’s and storm surges, please visit our website at www.NYC-EJA.org and click on “NYC Waterfront Revitalization Program and Vision 2020” link on the Campaigns page.)