

- [Qatar](#)
- [Gulf/Arab World](#)
- [Iraq](#)
- [Americas](#)
- [Britain/Ireland](#)
- [Europe/World](#)
- [India](#)
- [Pakistan/Afghanistan](#)
- [SriLanka/Bangladesh](#)
- [Philippines/East Asia](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Islam](#)
- [Finance & Business](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Back Issues](#)
- [Feedback](#)
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Home: Americas



Dire need to rid city of toxic water

Published: Wednesday, 7 September, 2005, 12:54 PM Doha Time

BATON ROUGE: The toxic brew of chemicals and human waste in the New Orleans floodwaters will have to be pumped into the Mississippi River or Lake Pontchartrain, raising the spectre of an environmental disaster on the heels of Hurricane Katrina, experts say.

The dire need to rid the drowned city of water could trigger fish kills and poison the delicate wetlands near New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Mississippi.

State and federal agencies have just begun water quality testing but environmental experts say the vile, stagnant chemical soup that sits in the streets of the city known as The Big Easy will contain traces of everything imaginable.

"Go home and identify all the chemicals in your house. It's a very long list," said **Ivor van Heerden**, head of a Louisiana State University centre that studies the public health impacts of hurricanes.

"And that's just in a home. Imagine what's in an industrial plant," he said. "Or a sewage plant."

Gasoline, diesel, anti-freeze, bleach, human waste, acids, alcohols and a host of other substances must be washed out of homes, factories, refineries, hospitals and other buildings.

In Metairie, east of New Orleans, the floodwater is tea-coloured, murky and smells of burnt sulphur. A thin film of oil is visible in the water.

Those who have waded into it say they could see only about 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5.1 cm) into the depths and that there was significant debris on and below the surface.

Experts said the longer water sat in the streets, the greater the chance gasoline and chemical tanks – as well as common containers holding anything from bleach to shampoo – would rupture.

Officials have said it may take up to 80 days to clear the water from New Orleans and surrounding parishes.

Van Heerden and Rodney Mallett, communications director for the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, say there do not appear to be any choices other than to pump the water into Lake Pontchartrain or the Mississippi River, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico, a key maritime spawning ground.

"I don't see how we could treat all that water," Mallett said.

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The result could be a second wave of disaster for southern Louisiana, said Harold Zeliger, a Florida-based chemical toxicologist and water quality consultant.

"In effect, it's going to kill everything in those waters," he said.

How much water New Orleans holds is open to question.

Van Heerden estimates it is billions of gallons. LSU researchers will use satellite imagery and computer modelling to get a better fix on the quantity.

Bio-remediation – cleaning up the water – would require the time and expense of constructing huge storage facilities, considered an impossibility, especially with the public clamour to get the water out quickly. – Reuters



Gulf Times Newspaper, 2005 ©