

Interim Staff Analysis Formaldehyde and FEMA Trailers July 2008

This is an interim staff analysis detailing the issue of formaldehyde in FEMA trailers, and the role of the manufacturers. Because this issue is ongoing and staff continues to obtain data, then issues discussed in the analysis remain open and subject to change.

I - Executive Summary

On July 9, 2008, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform will hold a hearing to further explore the issue of levels of formaldehyde reportedly emanating from travel trailers issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast in 2005. FEMA distributed these trailers for use as temporary housing for those displaced as a result of the storms.

This interim report evaluates the issue of formaldehyde and the trailer manufacturers who supplied units to FEMA after the 2005 hurricanes. It discusses the reasons the results of EPA and CDC studies are not without controversy. It shows that agencies had widely varying and inconsistent concerns about formaldehyde and discusses that absence of federal standards regulating formaldehyde in indoor air. It is important to note, however, that this report does not address the possible health effects associated with elevated or prolonged exposure to formaldehyde. These are also the subject of disagreement among government agencies and scientific studies and recommended exposure limits vary widely.

In the absence of government standards, blaming trailer manufacturers for doing what was expected of them would be misplaced and ineffective. In the 109th Congress, The Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina reported the failure of government, at all levels, to prepare and respond to a disaster that devastated people and property. The formaldehyde issue may demonstrate a continued government failure in some respects. For twenty-four years, HUD has set formaldehyde product standard and indoor air target levels for manufactured housing. Yet, these are now being criticized by other federal agencies as being too high, although these same agencies cannot agree on an alternative "safe" and reasonable standard. FEMA has compounded the problem. They reacted hastily by setting procurement requirements which effectively prevent travel trailers from being used for housing after future disasters. Serious oversight and reform efforts should resolve these various difficulties in a way which protects public health, clarifies vague government standards and does not penalize manufacturers and their tens of thousands of hard working employees.