

Study: Ike did not leave toxic sludge

By Leigh Jones
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GALVESTON — Hurricane Ike's floodwaters coated the island with a film of mud many residents feared might contain toxic levels of pollutants. But an analysis of the sediment by a University of Texas Medical Branch research team showed Ike left no dangerous levels of toxins.

Although tests did find some elevated levels of arsenic at several of the sites, they were not high enough to trigger any cleanup measures, said Jonathan Ward, director of the environmental toxicology division at the medical branch.

Ward presented the group's findings during Thursday's city council meeting. The results are good news, particularly because they showed Ike did not release any large amount of industrial chemicals, he said.

Most of the flooding that washed over the island when the storm made landfall Sept. 13 came from a 12-foot surge from Galveston Bay. The water came across the Port of Galveston and the city's industrial complexes before flowing into neighborhoods.

The sediment samples were tested for arsenic, chromium, cadmium, mercury, lead, dioxins, furans, polychlorinated biphenyls, asbestos, sulfur compounds, diesel range organics and semi-volatile organics.

The highest levels of almost all of the toxins were found in the sample collected near 27th and Church streets.

Six of the eight sites tested did have levels of arsenic that exceeded the Environmental Protection Agency's residential soil screening levels, but the amounts of the toxin were not enough to require the sediment be removed, Ward said.

But Ward, along with officials from the Galveston County Health District, did urge residents to use gloves and masks during cleanup efforts that might bring them into contact with any sediment that might be left.

People should also wear protective clothing to avoid skin exposure and avoid bringing any of the dried sediment and contaminated items into living quarters, said Dr. Mark Guidry, head of the health district.

Anyone working outside or in a flooded structure should always wash and clean up before eating anything, Guidry said.

Parents should keep children from eating dirt or put their hands in their mouth if they have been playing in dirt. Any bare spots in lawns should be covered with a layer of new soil or with grass or other vegetation.

The health district has not received any reports of illness associated with exposure to sediment, Guidry said.

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At a glance

List of collection sites:

East End Flats

Fish Village

19th Street and Avenue F

28th Street and Avenue F

42nd Street and Avenue H

57th Street and Avenue H

55th Street and Avenue O

81st Street and Stewart Road