



Society of Environmental Journalists

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TO: National Freedom of Information Officer
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We are writing to encourage the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to quickly respond to requests for more detailed information about chemical spills and other environmental releases resulting from Hurricane Katrina.

The Society of Environmental Journalists is the world's oldest and largest organization of individual working journalists covering environment affairs. Founded in 1990 and based in Jenkintown, Pa., our membership is composed of more than 1,450 journalists, educators and students dedicated to improving the quality, accuracy and visibility of environmental reporting.

The SEJ First Amendment Task Force was formed in March 2002 to, among other things, provide SEJ members with services to help them obtain and use public records and to deal with efforts to withhold those records from them.

Mark Schleifstein, reporter at *The Times-Picayune* and an SEJ board member, filed a Freedom of Information Act request on Monday, September 5, 2005 for information about the environmental consequences of Katrina, after his efforts to obtain answers without a formal request were unsuccessful. Several other SEJ members have filed similar FOIA requests today.

While the exact nature of the environmental damage done by Katrina may not be known for some time, it is clear that EPA is making assessments and equally clear that the agency should have some initial data that can and should be made public. For example, the EPA Web site notes that the agency is "compiling a comprehensive database of potential pollution sources" and using aircraft to "assess spills and chemical releases."

Even preliminary information from these EPA assessments would be helpful to environmental reporters trying to inform the public about potential threats to the environment and public health and safety.

At the very least, EPA should immediately agree to expedite the processing of the FOIA requests referenced above. They clearly meet the statutory requirements for expedited review, as EPA's failure to make this information public "could reasonably be expected to pose an imminent threat to the life or physical safety of an individual." See 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(6)(E)(V)(I).

Even better, EPA could agree to immediately begin posting the requested information on its website as part of its Hurricane Katrina response section and /or in its Electronic FOIA Reading Room. As you are aware, EPA is required to post such information in the Reading Room when such requested documents "because of the nature of their subject matter, the agency determines, have become or are likely to become the subject of subsequent requests for substantially the same records." See 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(2)(D).

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Improving the Quality, Accuracy and Visibility of Environmental Reporting