

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility

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January 31, 2014

Inspector General Arthur A. Elkins, Jr.
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building
1200 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Mail Code 2410T
Washington, DC 20460

Dear General Elkins:

We are writing on behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) to request that your office investigate recent events which raise serious questions about non-compliance with federal law carrying potentially significant public health consequences.

According to state website readings reinforced by media reports, during most of the period when lane closures on the George Washington Bridge ordered by associates of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie were in effect the federally required air quality monitor closest to the bridge was inoperative. We are asking the Office of Inspector General to determine who and what was behind the shutdown of the measuring device as thousands of vehicles idled for hours on the busiest motor-vehicle bridge in the world.

The closure of local access lanes on the George Washington Bridge for traffic entering from Fort Lee and the surrounding communities lasted from the morning of September 9, 2013 through the 13th. On the night of September 8th and continuing for the next two-and-half days, the air quality monitor operated by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) closest to the Bridge ceased reporting data about the level of particulates in the air.

These air pollution monitoring devices are required under the federal Clean Air Act and their use by state agencies takes place under regulations overseen by U.S. EPA. The purpose of the monitors is to measure the amount of diesel, oil and other fuel particles in the air. These particles are so small that they penetrate the deepest recesses of the lungs and are linked to asthma, other respiratory diseases and premature death. Children are especially susceptible to lung damage from particulates.

Federal regulations require that these air pollution monitors operate continuously except for "routine maintenance" or "instrument calibration" without permission from EPA. There has been no reported action by EPA approving this shutdown.





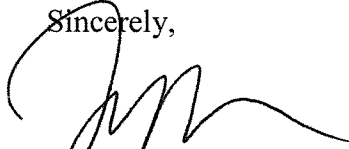
This particular monitor, located on top of a Jersey City firehouse, had previously experienced only very short outages. Readings from other monitors, as well as the shuttered monitor once it came back online, suggest that air quality reached unhealthy levels during the closure. Particulate readings on the reopened monitor were more than twice the level it recorded before it was shut off.

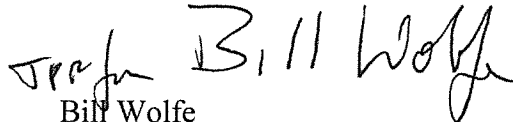
Perhaps there is an innocent explanation for marooning thousands in a pollution Twilight Zone but no one in the Christie administration has yet to offer one. DEP has refused to issue an explanation for this outage, referring media calls to Gov. Christie's press office which has yet to respond to press inquiries.

This extended outage of monitoring equipment masked the health effects on those stuck on the bridge enduring hours of exhaust from idling vehicles. Public health safeguards, like pollution monitors, should be off-limits to political manipulation.

We are asking your office to investigate the reasons for this extended outage and the consequences for responsible parties.

Sincerely,


 Jeff Ruch
 Executive Director


 Bill Wolfe
 New Jersey Director

