

Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton – Please Help Us!

As Department of the Interior employees, our hearts and prayers go out to all of the people affected by both Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and for those who lost their homes, livelihoods, and even their lives. Also, we are proud of the more than 1,400 Interior employees on the ground helping in the rescue and relief efforts and assisting in the massive federal recovery effort in the wake of these unprecedented catastrophes.

In as much as Interior's assistance efforts (e.g., fighting wildfires) are truly noteworthy, we must call to the attention of Interior's executive level management that all is not well on the home front at the Main Interior Building, located at 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

The Main Interior Building (MIB), currently undergoing modernization while occupied, is fraught with health and safety related issues and problems. The General Services Administration manages the modernization project. You can go to the MIB Modernization website to get the full scope of the modernization project at: <<http://www.doi.gov/modernization/index.html>>.

Each day there are strong hazardous chemical odors, welding fumes, soot, and other by-products originating from the modernization project construction zone that are making not only Interior employees ill but also visitors from the public. Each day, employee and contractor health complaints are met with silence or ineffective responses.

Unfortunately, little is being done to address the problems identified and raised this year by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA noted that various fundamental assumptions about the building's air handling system were faulty. For example, the air handling system in the modernization construction zone was supposed to be completely isolated and maintained under negative pressure to prevent airborne contaminants in the modernization construction zone from entering the rest of the Main Interior Building. The EPA, however, discovered that the air handling system was not isolated and was in fact recirculating airborne contaminants from the modernization construction zone throughout the occupied parts of the Main Interior Building.

Despite assurances by Secretary Norton that employee safety and health is of the "highest priority," the indoor air quality in the MIB has continually declined. Many Interior employees and contract personnel are already sick from the effects of breathing these air contaminants over a long period of time and suffer silently for fear of reprisal by management.

If top Interior managers and political appointees won't respond to serious, continuing health problems and conditions identified by EPA, what recourse do we have?

Secretary Norton, won't you please help your dedicated employees?

[Name Withheld on Request]