

The Politics of Mold

When water damage occurs, even the most apolitical person will get a taste of a well oiled political machine at work.

If the water damage is the fault of a third party and becomes a mold problem — say it's because of shoddy construction or an insurance company's delay in authorizing proper repairs — the politics is particularly brutal.

Ritt Goldstein of Common Dreams, a news service, recently filed this story. It's a *must read* for every homeowner.

Flooding, After the Deluge, and the Politics of Toxic Mold

by Ritt Goldstein - commondreams.org

For days now, a swollen Mississippi River has menacingly roamed far from its banks, devouring large swatches of picturesque river towns and some of the Midwest's best farmlands. While countless news organizations chronicle both the courage of those fighting 'Big Muddy's' assault and the anguish of those wounded by it, another battle is about to begin. This battle will go all but unseen, for the struggle will be one of individual households against mold, mold that is both toxic and dangerous, though there are those who insist otherwise.

With an estimated 11 million people and nine Midwestern states impacted by the floods, the severe weather preceding them, or both, toxic mold questions have assumed new significance. A reading of the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) mold concerns quickly helps one appreciate why.

According to an EPA website last updated April 30th: "Many symptoms and human health effects attributed to inhalation of mycotoxins have been reported including: mucous membrane irritation, skin rash, nausea, immune system suppression, acute or chronic liver damage, acute or chronic central nervous system damage, endocrine effects, and cancer." The EPA added, "it is clearly prudent to avoid exposure to molds and mycotoxins," and so performed an exercise in what should be obvious, but sometimes apparently is not.

Posing a dilemma for flood victims, some of those within the medical community have strongly downplayed toxic mold's dangers. One highly circulated pronouncement — in a text specifically aimed at flood victims — reassured: "Although molds release natural toxins, called mycotoxins, these don't cause problems to people who live in moldy houses because the toxins don't diffuse into the air. The only way to be exposed to them is to swallow them." But there seems to be a problem with this.

Published research exists which directly contradicts such statements, with even the EPA's just cited warning specifically mentioning the "inhalation of mycotoxins." It's been repeatedly found that mycotoxins can be airborne, inhaled, and are dangerous, with research also indicating that mold can pose dangers to "immunocompetent," healthy, individuals.

In 2004 a study conducted by scientists with the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, is believed to be the first which revealed that "mycotoxins can become airborne." The study, published in *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, concluded by noting the work "may have important implications for indoor air quality assessment."

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Another landmark 2004 study, titled "Adverse Health Effects of Indoor Molds," compiled by researchers from leading institutions including Harvard University and the University of Illinois at Chicago, concluded that exposure to high levels of mold can induce "injury to and dysfunction of multiple organs and systems" among normal, "immunocompetent," healthy individuals. Notably, the study specifically attributed the potential for "hemorrhaging disorders" to mycotoxin exposure, an issue the EPA has also raised.

The EPA maintains a web page titled "[Children's Health Initiative: Toxic Mold](#)." As part of the 'Background' section, the EPA cites an incident where: "A cluster of cases of acute pulmonary hemorrhage/hemosiderosis was reported in Cleveland, Ohio, where 27 infants from homes that suffered flood damage became sick (nine deaths) with the illness starting in January 1993."

While the case the EPA

cites is yet vigorously debated, it is widely known that attempts to remediate mold problems, without the use of a respirator, have produced nosebleeds among those so engaged.

Independent findings subsequent to 2004 led some leading researchers to declare levels of mycotoxins in mold affected structures as "several hundred" times higher than previously thought. Such a circumstance would seem to readily lend itself to a better appreciation of mold hazards, though, surprisingly, the hazards of mold have been discussed for years.

As early as 1999, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) declared: "Floods Carry a Hazardous Potential For Toxic Mold." And, for years now, courts throughout the Country have awarded damages to a number of toxic mold victims.

Given what appear to be such straightforward pronouncements upon toxic mold's dangers, some may question the basis for debate, whether there is actually debate, but a debate does exist. Having said this, it is important to empha-

size that many critics of this debate suggest its true foundations are other than medical or scientific.

In strictly monetary terms, the health, property, and liability costs of mold are projected as 'extremely substantive,' especially as many insurance companies no longer cover numerous types of mold-related claims.

As the chairman of the US House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, Congressman John Conyers (D-Mich), observed regarding toxic mold: "It's not that no one knows about it, but it seems that a lot of people don't want to know about it." Recently, and cutting to what many see as the crux of 'the debate,' came the reply of a European researcher to a query, a query concerning the health hazards mycotoxins pose for those living or working in mold affected environments.

"A politically, legally, and economically important question!" was all that was written, and perhaps all that needs to be.

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