In the days after Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans in late August 2005, news reports warned of a lingering “toxic soup” of hazardous chemicals in the floodwaters, a growing mountain of trash and debris, and mold. Others focused on images of looters and the human drama unfolding at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. In those early days of the crisis, many commentators were quick to assert that New Orleans would never be the same, that the city would not regain its status as a popular tourist destination. Although much of the information circulated was based primarily on speculation, rather than hard data, these stories and opinions received repeated airplay and left enduring impressions in the minds of viewers and listeners.

Today, as the Air & Waste Management Association continues to prepare for its 99th Annual Conference & Exhibition in New Orleans, June 20–23, 2006, some people may still have questions about the city. Is the environment safe for visitors? Is the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center ready to again host conferences? Has the city’s economy rebounded enough to make New Orleans an attractive and viable destination?

A&WMA leaders and conference planners asked many of the same questions before the decision to hold the conference in New Orleans was made. The answers, as outlined here, provide encouraging signals that New Orleans is making a strong recovery and will be more than ready to host a thoroughly enjoyable 99th Annual Conference & Exhibition.

**FINDINGS SHOW CITY IS ENVIRONMENTALLY SAFE**

Only a week after three interior city levees were breached, which resulted in the flooding of many areas of New Orleans, a team of researchers from the Louisiana Water Resources Research Institute at Louisiana State University sampled floodwater from several city neighborhoods. Their report, released online in October 2005 through the American Chemical Society’s journal Environmental Science & Technology, found that New Orleans floodwaters were no more polluted than the city’s storm drains after a typical heavy rain.

Their findings were reinforced in a December 6, 2005, statement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), titled Environmental Assessment Summary for Areas of Jefferson, Orleans, St. Bernard, and Plaquemines Parishes Flooded as a Result of Hurricane Katrina. The statement, still posted on EPA’s Web site as of mid-February, details research by EPA and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) on post-Katrina floodwater, sediment, and air quality samples.

In the report’s floodwater assessments, EPA collected nearly 400 floodwater samples and analyzed each for nearly 200 chemicals. EPA found that average concentrations of chemicals were below levels of concern for short-term (i.e., 90 days) exposure, and with the removal of floodwaters as of October 11, they no longer served as a source of exposure to residents returning to impacted areas.

As for air quality, extensive EPA and LDEQ air samples in areas affected by Hurricane Katrina showed that concentrations of toxic air pollutants were below the EPA one-year screening levels and below the Louisiana ambient air standards for toxic air pollutants. In addition, New Orleans continues to be an attainment area for criteria pollutants, and the city has not exceeded National Ambient Air Quality Standards as a consequence of Katrina.

According to Dr. Kevin Stevens, director of the New Orleans Department of Health, who briefed association executives visiting New Orleans on January 18, 2006, the department has “tested, retested, and continues to test land, sea, and air,” and test results show the city is safe for visitors and residents.

**PUBLIC SAFETY ISSUES ADDRESSED**

Of the active 1668 pre-Katrina police officers, 1536 are back on duty. The Vieux Carre police station in the heart of the French Quarter is operating and fully functional.

In addition, most hospitals have reopened. Touro Infirmary, a three-minute drive from the convention center, and Tulane University Hospital and Clinic, a four-minute drive from the center, both have reopened and provide full inpatient diagnostic and surgical services.

**TRANSPORTATION BACK ON TRACK**

For travelers, getting to and from New Orleans is expected to be close to normal by June 2006. Air travel returned to New Orleans on September 13, 2005, and as of January 9,
Restaurants are ready to serve

The world-renowned Emeril’s chain reopened its flagship restaurant in the New Orleans Warehouse district in December 2005, and many other restaurants, including all New Orleans signature restaurants, have also reopened. The most recent figures available from the Louisiana Restaurant Association, dated February 3, 2006, show that 837 New Orleans restaurants have received recertification from the Louisiana Department of Health and Human Services, meaning they are back in business and once again serving up some of the world’s most diverse and highly renowned cuisines.

Convention Center Renovations Progressing

In addition to cleanup activities following Katrina, the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center has undergone dramatic renovation in the past few months, according to the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau. At press time, the center was preparing to host the “Gift 2 Jewelry Show,” beginning February 17, 2006. The annual event typically attracts 4500 out-of-state attendees and visitors.

By June, the center is expected to have eight of its 12 halls open, providing more than enough room to host A&WMA’s Annual Conference and several other scheduled events, including meetings of the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (June 20–23), the American Library Association (ALA; June 22–29), and the Airborne Law Enforcement Association (July 19–22). The Hilton New Orleans Riverside, the Conference Headquarters Hotel, like many other downtown hotels, did not experience flooding and remained in operation throughout the storm.

Like representatives of A&WMA, Diedre Irwin Ross, director of ALA’s Conference Services, has toured New Orleans since the hurricane and is confident that the city will be ready to host the expected 20,000 attendees of her association’s conference. “We saw for ourselves what was actually happening,” she says. “We felt that by the time of our meeting at the end of June, things would be back in order and we’d be ready to go and have a wonderful time.”

Although parts of New Orleans, especially outlying areas away from centers of business and tourism, still have a long way to go in their recovery, the core of the city is eager to show off its comeback. The most historic and best-known areas that A&WMA Annual Conference & Exhibition attendees are likely to visit—the French Quarter, the Warehouse/Arts District, the Central Business District, or the Garden District—remain intact. In addition, the Local Host Committee of the Louisiana Section has worked closely with A&WMA staff to ensure that attendees have a safe, enjoyable, and rewarding experience. All in all, A&WMA’s 99th Annual Conference & Exhibition is shaping up to be memorable and fulfilling.

For more information on New Orleans, visit the New Orleans Convention & Visitors Bureau’s Web site at www.neworleanscvb.com, or call 1-800-672-6124. To keep abreast of Annual Conference & Exhibition developments, visit and bookmark www.awma.org/ace2006, or call A&WMA Member Services at 1-800-270-3444.