



# NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release: September 8, 2008

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## BECKY GILLETTE WINS NATIONAL SIERRA CLUB AWARD

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF. – Becky Gillette of Eurkea Springs, Ark., has won the 2008 Sierra Club Special Achievement Awards for a single act of importance dedicated to conservation. Gillette led efforts to expose the dangers of formaldehyde in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers. *USA Today* called her the “Gulf Coast’s Erin Brockovich.”

Gillette started hearing reports of sickness: persistent and debilitating bouts of coughing, aches, infections, and inflamed eyes and throats affecting especially the young and old. A local pediatrician was making similar observations. Both noticed these symptoms clustered in households inhabiting trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as emergency housing for Katrina’s homeless. Tens of thousands of the trailers spread across Louisiana and Mississippi and into coastal Alabama.

Testimony by residents about a smell inside the trailers soon pointed toward a culprit: formaldehyde. It’s a common ingredient in the plywood and particle board both found in abundance in the FEMA trailers. Ordinarily trailers of this type are used for temporary housing or for travel. But the ones FEMA installed were turning into long-term residences.

Despite official denials that formaldehyde seeping from the trailers could be the cause of the chronic sickness, Becky persisted. She located experts who confirmed that traces of formaldehyde in the air of confined spaces could produce the observed symptoms. The high temperatures and humidity of the coast could also magnify the outgassing of formaldehyde into the air of the trailers.

Next Gillette searched out a company with a test kit that could detect the presence of formaldehyde. With permission from residents, she installed them in FEMA trailers. The results were astonishing: the air in nearly all of the trailers was infested with formaldehyde in amounts far above what any regulatory agency considered safe.

These findings led to local media releases and press conferences, which generated numerous newspaper and TV stories, along with dismissive reactions from officialdom. The story circulated around the country, and eventually the national media began to pay attention. MSNBC carried a segment about the “toxic tin cans,” as Gillette christened them.

Politicians could not ignore the issue. FEMA had to respond to congressional requests for information and start testing its trailers for formaldehyde, while issuing ever feebler assertions that there wasn’t really a serious problem. Meanwhile, Gillette created a website, [www.toxictrailers.com](http://www.toxictrailers.com). The site invited people to enter their own accounts of formaldehyde episodes. This site is becoming a national clearinghouse about formaldehyde matters. It turns out that not only trailers but also manufactured homes, industrial plants, and other places are plagued with formaldehyde and its consequences. A congressional committee has begun using the site to post information about its investigations.



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The responsible agencies have begun, though slowly and reluctantly, to take some remedial actions. And formaldehyde has become a topic that can't be ignored when future crises require emergency housing for victims.

The award will be presented Sept. 20 during the Sierra Club's Annual Dinner in San Francisco. For more information on the Sierra Club awards program, visit [www. sierraclub.org/awards](http://www.sierraclub.org/awards).

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