

# Speaking science to power

EPA researcher gets her job back — for the second time.

Jeff Tollefson

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People working in the rubble of the World Trade Center towers were exposed to more corrosive dust than the EPA let on, according to Cate Jenkins.

Last week a federal appeals board sent Cate Jenkins back to work at the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), marking another victory in the rabble-rousing chemist's colourful career. The agency had fired the 65-year-old scientist in December 2010, alleging that she threatened a supervisor, but the US Merit Systems Protection Board ruled that the EPA failed to inform Jenkins of all of the charges against her.

Jenkins maintains that she was fired in retaliation for her work exposing pollution dangers at the World Trade Center site in New York after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In parallel with her formal work at the EPA, Jenkins has alleged, among other things, that EPA used a falsified health standard that remains in place today to downplay the dangers of corrosive dust at the site. In the months and years following the attacks, Jenkins reported her findings to the EPA Inspector General, Congress and the FBI. Although she has now been cleared to return to work, the whistle-blower case continues in a separate process at the US Department of Labor. The EPA could also choose to dismiss her again, this time following the proper procedures.

Jenkins says that she was fulfilling her obligations as a federal employee, responding to individuals and organizations that seek her expertise in reviewing technical data. She won an earlier whistle-blower case in 1996 involving Vietnam War veterans' exposure to Agent Orange. She talks to *Nature* about her work, her advocacy and the manipulation of scientific data.

**What do you do at the EPA?**

My general duties at the EPA are database design to support our work on hazardous releases. I work on regulatory development, and these are heavy-duty databases that focus on particular industries or pollutants. That's what I do on a daily basis. I don't in any way get assigned by my supervisors to rat on them to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

**But you have, in fact, reported your superiors to the FBI and others?**

I am not really a 'whistle-blower'. I'm a chemist. I have particular skills and a contribution to make. I do have an obligation under the law to report fraud, waste and abuse to the proper authorities. When I find something wrong, I will report it either to the [EPA] inspector general, Congress or, lately, the FBI. That's my role as an advocate. In our country, not only can you run around the streets in large groups carrying banners, but you can also criticize on paper, as I have. It's the right thing to do. More people should do it.

**How did you get involved in advocacy work?**

It is not really advocacy, but instead finding and then exposing misrepresentations by the government and private interests. I am not a citizen scientist, because I am doing this work as an EPA scientist paid by the government. My documents exposing fraud, waste and abuse are pursuant to an executive order incumbent upon all federal employees.

**Looking back, are you surprised at how your career has unfolded?**

People's lives take interesting turns. I might well have been better suited in a more sanitary academic environment, but here I am working for the EPA.

**How do you choose where to focus your energy?**

Vietnam vets, firefighters, police, first responders, military personnel — those are groups that I admire, and I support them. If I can use my science to provide information about toxic exposures for them, I will do that. I will go the extra mile.

**What did you find when you started looking into safety issues at the World Trade Center shortly after the cleanup began?**

I started going through actual data from the EPA and New York City health officials, rather than relying on their press statements. The findings I reported seemed to be very helpful to people. It just mushroomed. You are allowed official time to do this at the EPA, but the reports and the things I was generating were very comprehensive. I overturned every little rock and stone. I was doing this pretty much on my own time.

**Have these problems been corrected today?**

No. First responders and citizens living and working near Ground Zero (the World Trade Center site) continue to experience health effects. The EPA has failed to correct its falsified regulation regarding corrosive dust. Today, people living near cement-manufacturing plants are inhaling corrosive dust without warning because of the EPA's falsified regulation. Implosion demolitions of buildings are billed as a spectator events, without warning that the dust is corrosive when inhaled.

**How do you view the government's actions concerning public safety at Ground Zero?**

I grant that at the time, there was a legitimate national-security interest in not looking like we were falling apart. However, if first responders had known they were being exposed to a corrosive atmosphere, there would have been much greater impetus for wearing protective equipment, and medical personnel would have known how to treat the respiratory symptoms if they had known World Trade Center dust was corrosive.

**Have you ever looked into official pollution data without finding manipulation of some kind?**

Never, never, and an Internal Revenue Service auditor will tell you the same thing. There is always reasonable suspicion to begin with. The type of audits I do are on the chemical and testing side. I have the skills as a chemist to see how data have been manipulated. It's grueling, hard work, but I can always find it.

What is the lesson? Our regulations on the books are extremely difficult to adhere to. If the EPA were to enforce things to the letter, it would be very difficult. [Agency officials] always cut industry slack, and they do it by manipulating the data. I wouldn't call it malevolent so much. I would call it human nature, like speeding. But the falsification of the EPA's corrosivity characteristic regulation was no mistake.

**The Merit Systems Protection Board ruling focused on a violation of your constitutional right to due process. Is your job safe now?**

I hope they don't have the stomach to try to fire me again.

**In parallel, a whistleblower case involving these same issues is still pending before an administrative judge at the Department of Labor. What comes next?**

The Department of Labor case is not just about due-process violations, but the full range of my whistle-blowing. I think the World Trade Center case is going to be alive for the rest of my life.

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