

A Common Sense Solution for Haiti & America

An old adage exhorts that “When common sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.”

I was reminded of this quote while reading articles about the recovery in Haiti in recent weeks. It’s encouraging to hear that, with aid from the U.S. government, Haitians are being relocated back to their original home sites. U.S. contractors are clearing debris and/or inspecting intact structures for soundness.

Some Haitians may find their homes livable and repairable, while many more will be pitching a tent on their vacant lots. However, this certainly is a better solution than the current living conditions many of the displaced find themselves in. It also seems to be a better choice than moving people into temporary relocation camps, likely breeding new slums in this poverty-stricken Caribbean nation.

Several weeks ago, I read an editorial by left-of-center columnist Eugene Robinson that addressed the issue of disposing of FEMA trailers and recreational vehicles purchased by the federal government for Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Nearly \$3 billion of our taxes were spent on these temporary dwellings, and many now sit vacant and never used. To further compound problems, some of these have tested for high formaldehyde levels, especially when exposed to the hot sun. This unsavory chemical has been blamed for sickening some trailer residents.

Now the federal government wants to slap a warning label on the trailers and sell them for pennies on the dollar to recoup a pittance of what was spent. Robinson’s editorial calls out the Obama administration on why this is a bad idea, what with the administration’s interest in health care. Of course, he’s also quick to throw some blame the Bush administration’s way, citing their lackluster response to Katrina in the first place.

In putting these two bits of news together, I think I can see a common-sense solution here. With many of these vacant trailers located in the southeastern Gulf region, why not ship them to Haiti? While Haiti’s hot climate certainly won’t help the formaldehyde situation, only certain trailers have tested for high levels of the substance. Surely it’s less toxic than many of the particulates leeching into Haiti’s atmosphere from crumbled buildings and infrastructure.

The government could make it even better: Employ Americans that are currently out of work to fix up damaged trailers and install ventilation systems. Use TARP bailout funds to provide workers their wages. Imagine the goodwill this could foster: The federal government putting people back to work (if temporarily) and giving real aid to Haiti. With their prime location near the Gulf, how hard would it be to haul the trailers to port and load them up on a freighter? I dare say many of these RVs and single-wide dwellings are more palatial than homes Haitians had *before* January 2010.

With high unemployment and even higher fuel prices, what Americans don’t need are more recreational vehicles. These require a gas-guzzling pickup to haul. (And when you’re like me and stand north of six feet, there’s nothing “recreational” about trying to fit into one of these tin cans!)

I view this as a win-win situation all around. Robinson's editorial called for these trailers to be destroyed. I think we can avoid gross waste and keep toxic chemicals out of landfills by using them for their original purpose: sheltering those displaced by Mother Nature.

I realize my idea is sure to have its critics, caveats, and cautions. But sometimes it seems that America could accomplish so much more if only common sense would trump the bureaucracy of government.