

Chemical spill leaves 300,000 without water in West Virginia

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Up to 300,000 people in nine West Virginia counties have been left without safe drinking water following a chemical spill into the Elk River in the state's capital city of Charleston on Thursday. The Obama administration joined West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin in declaring a state of emergency for Boone, Cabell, Clay, Jackson, Kanawha, Lincoln, Logan, Putnam, and Roane counties. Tomblin urged residents in the affected areas not to use tap water for drinking, cooking, washing, or bathing.

Thousands of bars, restaurants, day-care centers, nursing homes, and other businesses with health permits were shut down with orders to "cease operations immediately." Schools and government offices were also closed on Friday in some of the affected counties. Medical officials reported being overwhelmed with concerned residents at local hospitals and medical facilities, while the Charleston Area Medical Center began implementing water-conserving measures and turning away all but emergency patients.

Charleston Mayor Danny Jones claimed of the emergency, "This has been devastating to the public at large and to the people that live in our city."

Governor Tomblin mobilized the state's National Guard to aid in the distribution of water to residents as local stores were quickly stripped of their bottled water supplies. FEMA has reportedly sent 75 trucks of water expected to arrive in Charleston Friday night.

The response to the spill has been confused at best and information regarding the chemical and the threat it poses to health has been slow to come.

"Nobody really knows how dangerous [the chemical] could be," warned Governor Tomblin in announcing the state of emergency. "However, it is in the [water] system."

"We don't know that the water is not safe, but I can't say it is safe," explained Jeff McIntyre, president of West Virginia American Water, whose distribution system is the one affected by the spill.

According to a Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the chemical—known as 4-methylcyclohexane methanol—is a "sudsing agent" used in the processing of coal.

"Our understanding is it's not an especially toxic material," explained DEP spokesman Tom Aluise. "It's not dangerous necessarily to be around." Fact sheets for the chemical warn of skin and eye irritation, as well as health risks if inhaled or ingested.

The leak was discovered Thursday morning after DEP officials began receiving odor complaints near a chemical facility in Charleston. The chemical plant is owned by Freedom Industries, "a full service producer of specialty chemicals for the mining, steel, and cement industries," according to the company's web site.

DEP air-quality inspectors sent out to investigate the fumes discovered a 40,000-gallon storage tank from which a leaking chemical had overcome its secondary concrete containment and was flowing into the nearby Elk River, just upstream from the intake of American Water's Kanawha Valley water treatment plant.

According to Director of Emergency Response and Homeland Security for DEP, Mike Dorsey, Freedom Industries had not self-reported the spill and the leak in the tank appeared to have existed "for some time." DEP spokesman Tom Aluise later claimed the agency was "confident that no more than 5,000 gallons escaped [the storage area]."

Director of Emergency Management in Kanawha County, Dale Petry, told Fox News that when his agency arrived at the site on Thursday, they were initially told there was no problem because the

chemical floated on top of the water and would not affect the water intake. However, the chemical proved to be water soluble and quickly infiltrated the whole water distribution system.

Hours before Governor Tomblin declared the state of emergency around 6 pm, an official statement from American Water was issued assuring the public that the spill “does not present a health risk to customers.”

The company’s initial confidence that the treatment plant could handle the chemical later gave way after tests revealed its presence in the distribution system. The company then warned customers that their “water should not be used for any purpose other than toilet flushing or firefighting.”

“This is not a chemical that we deal with every day. It’s not the type of thing we would see in dealing with a water treatment plant,” McIntyre later admitted. “We took some time to understand even what we were dealing with at the time.”

There is as yet no timeline for how long it will take for American Water to flush the chemical from its distribution system which includes some 1,500 miles of pipeline. Until tests can confirm that the system is clean and the water is safe, officials claim the water ban will remain in effect.

Several questions remain unanswered at this point. What did Freedom Industries know about the leak and when? Why was the leak not monitored or self-reported by the company? If local residents were concerned enough with the strong fumes nearby, how could management at the actual facility not have been similarly aware something was wrong?

It also remains to be learned why the tank was able to be leaking “for some time” without regulators knowing about it. What is the health and safety record of Freedom Industries? It has been reported that the storage area from which the chemicals leaked is part of a former Pennzoil refinery from the 1930s and '40s. When was the last time the facility was inspected?

U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin announced that his office was opening an investigation into the spill, which can be expected to be nothing more than an exercise in damage control.

Moreover, the spill raises more fundamental questions about the organization of society under capitalism. Why should a private company be allowed to keep massive storage tanks of chemicals on the river

bank just upstream from a major water intake for hundreds of thousands of people? The recklessness of this situation is further exposed by the fact that once a leak is discovered, no one seems to know exactly what the nature of the chemical is or what health risks it poses to people.

This state of affairs must be replaced with a social organization that is rational and planned. Industries which are essential to modern life, yet pose significant health and safety risks, must be placed under the democratic control of the population and operated in the interests of society, not private profit.



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