

300,000 in West Virginia remain without safe water for fourth day

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Some 300,000 West Virginians—nearly 17 percent of the state’s population—have entered their fourth day without safe water with no timeline yet being offered as to when water service will be restored. A state and federal state of emergency remains in effect for nine counties in southern West Virginia, with residents advised not to drink, cook, wash or bathe with their tap water.

The state’s water supply has been contaminated from a chemical leak on the Elk River in Charleston, just upstream from West Virginia American Water Company’s Kanawha Valley water treatment plant intake.

The situation has caused mass disruption for residents, especially in Charleston, the state capital and most populous city. Nearly all businesses that rely on the water supply—bars, restaurants, hotels and day-care centers—have been closed. Schools and government offices were also closed Friday, and the state legislature session and Supreme Court hearings were cancelled.

Area hospitals have implemented water conservation protocols, cancelling all elective surgeries and operations and accepting only emergency admissions. Charleston’s Yeager Airport has also reported canceled flights due to service issues involving a lack of water.

With on-hand bottled water supplies quickly depleted from local stores following Governor Earl Ray Tumbler’s state of emergency announcement Thursday evening, emergency water supplies began arriving to the region Friday night. The West Virginia National Guard reported it had received 1.4 million liters of water for distribution on Saturday, with another 1.6 million on their way. However, residents have been forced to wait in long lines at distribution centers set up throughout the affected counties.

The situation will only grow more dire every day safe water service remains suspended. In addition to the public health and sanitation risks posed to the population unable to shower, brush their teeth, or simply wash their hands

without bottled water, residents will be faced with the challenge of cooking and eating without adequate water. Nearly all local restaurants are closed unless they can prove they have a safe alternative source for water, and grocery store delis and produce sections that utilize water are closed or providing limited services.

There is also the danger that elderly, sick and disabled residents may not be able to receive adequate clean water if they do not have family or friends looking after them. In addition to some of the highest poverty rates in the nation, West Virginia is also home to some of the highest concentrations of elderly and disabled people.

The source of the devastating chemical leak on the Elk River is Freedom Industries, “a full service producer of specialty chemicals for the mining, steel, and cement industries,” according to the company’s web site.

Initially, environmental officials reported that between 2,000 and 5,000 gallons of 4-methylcyclohexane methanol, also known as Crude MCHM, leaked from a 40,000-gallon storage tank, overcame its secondary concrete containment and made its way into the nearby Elk River. These estimates have since been revised upward to around 7,500 gallons.

MCHM is believed to be lethal only at high concentrations and prolonged exposure; however, contact with the chemical can cause nausea, dizziness, vomiting and eye and skin irritation. Scores of people have reported symptoms at area hospitals, but according to the Department of Health and Human Resources, only a handful of admissions are known of at this time.

MCHM is used in the cleaning process of coal—the removal of rocks, soils, clays and other impurities—in preparation for its transportation and sale on the market.

Residents began complaining about the chemical’s pungent odor early Thursday morning. The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) reported complaints as early as 8:15 a.m. The DEP dispatched air

quality inspectors who discovered the leaking tank at Freedom Industries' riverside facility at 11:10 a.m.

Freedom Industries' president, Gary Southern, claimed the company became aware of the leaking storage tank around 10:30 a.m. However, the company did not report the spill until around noon, that is, well after inspectors and other officials had arrived.

Southern did not hold a press conference until Friday night, and even then provided only generic answers and what one local reporter described as "stammers, shrugs, and stares." In a video of the press conference, Southern is reprimanded by reporters after he first tries to end the conference without answering their questions because "it has been a long day."

Moments later, when asked if there are any systems in place to alert the company of a spill outside of the smell given off by a leaking chemical, Southern arrogantly ignores the question and tells the media, "At this moment in time, I think that's all we have time for." He begins walking off to the shouts of indignant reporters.

DEP Emergency Response Director Mike Dorsey confirmed that Freedom Industries had not reported the spill and that the leak in the tank appeared to have existed "for some time." In a press release, the agency explained that upon its discovery of the leak, "no spill containment measures had been initiated [by the company]."

Kanawha County Emergency Director Dale Petri told Fox News that officials were initially told not to worry when they arrived at the site, because the chemical would float on top of the water and wouldn't affect the water intakes. This later proved to be false—MCHM is water soluble and infiltrated the entire distribution system. This property of the chemical also prevents the spill from being cleaned or contained with surface booms.

Even American Water initially believed their treatment facility would be able to handle the chemical, assuring the public in an early press release Thursday that the spill "does not present a health risk to customers." By 4 p.m., however, it became clear that the chemical was present in the finished water entering the distribution system.

At that point the water company warned customers not to use the water. "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," American Water President Jeff McIntyre later admitted. "We took some time to understand even what we were dealing with at the time."

There is as yet still no timeline for when safe water service will be available again, but McIntyre told a

Saturday press conference, "I would think we're talking days." When questioned by reporters Saturday, McIntyre also reaffirmed his Friday statement that "We don't know that the water is not safe, but I can't say it is safe."

While water sampling has shown the concentration of the chemical in the water supply is declining, officials say that tests conducted at the water treatment facility must first reveal concentrations below the federally recommended 1 part per billion consistently for a 24-hour period. Once this threshold has been reached, American Water will begin flushing the system and sampling the water across the nine affected counties.

On Friday, the DEP issued a Notice of Violation to Freedom Industries for "statutory air pollution," as well as a Cease Operations Order. The DEP ordered the company to remove "all material from all above-ground storage tanks and store the material in an off-site area which provides adequate secondary containment."

The company was also required to submit for approval "an appropriate plan of corrective action," which explains how it is going to clean the contaminated soil and groundwater as well as dispose of the chemicals stored in the tanks. According to the DEP, in addition to the three MCHM storage tanks in the failed containment area, there are also 11 additional tanks containing Calcium Chloride and Glycerin.

The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) both assert they have no record of prior violations by Freedom Industries. Because the company's riverside property is only used as a storage facility and transport terminal and is not involved in production, the DEP claims it is not subject to inspections by its agency.

Several investigations into the spill have been announced at this point, including by US Attorney Booth Goodwin, the US Chemical Safety Board, OSHA, EPA and the West Virginia DEP.



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