

# West Virginia water crisis continues as second chemical is identified

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Freedom Industries—the company responsible for the January 9 chemical spill just outside Charleston, West Virginia, which poisoned the water for 300,000 state residents—revealed to state regulators on Tuesday that the leak also contained polyglycol ethers, or PPH.

The revelation calls into further question the 1-part-per-million exposure threshold set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and used by West Virginia American Water (WVAM), the utility company, to determine that the affected water is now safe for public use and consumption.

The chemical spill resulted in a water ban for nine West Virginia counties—affecting more than 16 percent of the state’s population—for over a week and declarations of a state of emergency at both the state and federal levels. With widespread business and school closings, the water ban imposed major hardships on the region’s working population who were unable to use their tap water for anything other than flushing toilets and had to rely on bottled water from emergency distribution centers. (See: West Virginia residents speak out on chemical disaster)

Two weeks after the spill, little is yet known about the leaked chemical, crude MCHM, used in the processing of coal, or the long-term health risks it poses to the population. The CDC was called upon and issued its 1-ppm safe exposure threshold early last week, which has become the basis for WVAM’s lifting of the water ban.

However, serious concerns remain among residents as there are widespread reports of a lingering licorice-like odor, characteristic of crude MCHM, in the water now deemed safe for use and consumption. Hundreds have been treated in area hospitals for eye and skin irritation, respiratory problems and flu-like symptoms associated with exposure to the chemical. (See: Problems remain

as water is restored in West Virginia)

In a community conference last Saturday, Commissioner for the Bureau of Public Health, Dr. Letitia Tierney, downplayed residents’ concerns about water safety. She suggested the hundreds of emergency room visits since the water was deemed safe were caused by the flu and virus season and dismissed the skin burns as “solar burn[s],” which are “similar to sunburn...and are easily treated with over-the-counter products.”

Based on an animal study conducted in the 1990s by the chemical’s manufacturer, Eastman Chemical, on 4-methylcyclohexane methanol, the methodology of the CDC’s 1-ppm guideline has been increasingly questioned by scientists who have pointed out that the study was conducted on only one of six chemicals in the crude MCHM mixture which spilled.

Moreover, as Eastman spokeswoman Maranda Demuth acknowledged to the *Charleston Gazette*, “Eastman’s toxicological studies for crude MCHM are not published in scientific journals and therefore are not what are commonly referred to as peer-reviewed studies.”

Revelations—12 days after the Jan 9 spill—that Freedom Industries was adding PPH to its crude MCHM mixture has only generated further fear about the safety of the water.

The Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) provided by Freedom indicates that PPH has “low oral toxicity,” and WVAM claims that state chemical experts believe the company’s “treatment process would likely have removed this chemical.” However, since the existence of the chemical was unknown, the tests conducted so far did not seek to determine its presence. WVAM claims it will run additional tests for PPH on all its samples collected so far.

After obtaining “additional animal studies about MCHM,” the CDC also sent a letter last Wednesday to West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Secretary Karen Bowling advising that “due to limited availability of data, and out of an abundance of caution, you may wish to consider [an] alternative drinking water source for pregnant women until the chemical is at non-detectable levels in the water distribution system.”

In a letter to the CDC, West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin and Representative Shelley Moore Capito noted, “It is particularly concerning that as many as 150,000 people who had been under a ‘do-not-use’ water order were told that their water supply was safe for use before the CDC’s recommendation that pregnant women should consider an alternative drinking water source.”

And while the CDC, the water company and the state continue to maintain that the water is safe for young children to consume below the 1-ppm level, individual doctors and health officials have come forward recommending that such children should avoid contact with and consumption of the water until the chemical reaches non-detectable levels.

Furthermore, a federal lawsuit filed last week on behalf of affected businesses alleges that “4-MCHM is a combination of two very dangerous chemicals known to cause cancer and other effects, but the MSDS issued by the manufacturer, Eastman Chemical Company, ignore and hide the extensive scientific information known showing the risks of the chemical’s carcinogenic and highly toxic component parts.”

Eastman disputes the claim, saying it has no knowledge of any studies backing up the allegations about cancer risk, and points to the fact that the chemical was reviewed and approved by the US Environmental Protection Agency, which did not require further tests since the chemical was only for industrial use.

When the CDC finally agreed to be interviewed about its methodology last Thursday, CDC senior press officer Tom Skinner told the *Gazette*, “This whole situation is very fluid, so it’s almost as if we’re learning as we go.”

“This is a dynamic and evolving event,” Chief CDC medical officer Dr. Vikas Kapil claimed as he defended the agency’s 1-ppm screening level. “As we get

additional information, we will be able to use that information as it becomes available,” he said.

The latest developments regarding the tainted water point to a deepening crisis in West Virginia—home to some of the most oppressed and impoverished sections of the population—that threatens to evolve into a major health catastrophe.

Amid growing concern and skepticism, West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin, a Democrat, helpfully told residents, “It’s your decision,” in a press conference on Monday. “If you do not feel comfortable drinking or cooking with this water, then use bottled water.”

Such remarks expose the level to which the banks and corporations exercise a complete stranglehold over American society, from the regulatory agencies up to the heights of the political establishment.

The response to the water crisis has been left entirely in the hands of the privately-owned water utility, WVAW, a division of the multi-billion dollar American Water. Just as in the case of the 2010 BP oil spill, a private company has been left to determine questions affecting the health and safety of a significant section of the population.

Each new development and revelation in West Virginia exposes only greater levels of recklessness and criminality, yet no one has been arrested or charged with any wrongdoing. The company responsible for the spill, Freedom Industries, has been allowed to declare bankruptcy and shield itself from liability for the disaster. (See: Company responsible for West Virginia chemical spill declares bankruptcy)

Not only must criminal charges be brought against those responsible for the water crisis in West Virginia, but the assets of Freedom must be seized to provide compensation for those harmed by the chemical spill. Both the chemical industry and the water utilities must be nationalized and placed under the democratic control of the working population to ensure their safe operation in the interests of society and not profit.



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