

More than 100,000 gallons released in West Virginia coal slurry spill

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More than 100,000 gallons of coal slurry—a toxic liquid mixture of cleaning chemicals and coal refuse—contaminated about six miles of a stream in Kanawha County, West Virginia on Tuesday. Kanawha County is home to the state’s capital, Charleston, and was the epicenter for last month’s chemical spill which poisoned the water supply for 300,000 residents in nine counties. (See: Chemical spill leaves 300,000 without water in West Virginia)

According to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the slurry spill occurred at the Kanawha Eagle coal processing plant operated by Patriot Coal after a valve malfunctioned in the line carrying the toxic coal waste from the facility’s preparation plant to its impoundment. The slurry dumped into Fields Creek and then flowed into the Kanawha River.

Although officials claim the toxic mixture poses no threat to the region’s already troubled water supply, it is believed the spill may contain polyglycol ethers, or PPH – one of the same chemicals along with crude MCHM which spilled last month. Patriot has claimed the facility no longer uses crude MCHM at the facility.

DEP officials believe the spill occurred over a three-hour period early Tuesday morning. Patriot claims it turned off the pump for the line at 5:30 a.m. when the leak was discovered, but the company didn’t report the incident to state officials until 7:42 a.m.

Both the coal slurry spill and the January 9 chemical spill, as well as the coal ash spill in North Carolina last week, highlight the threat posed to the population by private ownership of industry and the unending drive towards deregulation.

In a 2009 review by the US Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, the agency found that DEP’s “existing policies and procedures are not effective in reducing or preventing blackwater spills” and suggested the state agency review its policies, a request DEP disregarded.

More than a month after the chemical spill, and weeks since state and federal officials lifted a “do not use” ban clearing the water for use, major concerns remain over the

safety of the region’s water supply. On Monday, West Virginia Senator Jay Rockefeller opened an interview with NPR by saying, “I wouldn’t drink that water if you paid me.” When asked why, he responded, “Well, because...nobody has said that it’s safe.”

Last week, West Virginia Secretary of State Natalie Tennant gave an indication of the growing anger the chemical spill has precipitated. “People are fed up,” Tennant said at a hearing on the spill. “They are angry, and they are scared. Several people showed up at a town hall in Charleston last week with rashes they believe are connected to the water. Others have complained of headaches, nausea and vomiting. Families are melting snow to give their kids baths.”

According to the Department of Health and Human Resources, nearly 550 people were treated in area hospitals for symptoms—skin and eye irritation, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea— associated with exposure to the tainted water between the date of the spill and January 24. The numbers have only increased since then.

The January 9 spill occurred at a virtually unregulated chemical storage facility operated by Freedom Industries on the Elk River just upstream from West Virginia American Water’s (WVAW) main water treatment intake, which supplies water for nine surrounding counties— more than 16 percent of the state’s population. Freedom has since filed for bankruptcy protection in order to legally shield itself from the dozens of lawsuits filed against it. (See: Company responsible for West Virginia chemical spill declares bankruptcy)

Some 10,000 gallons of chemicals, including crude MCHM and PPH, leaked out of a half-century-old storage tank and overcame its poorly-maintained secondary containment structure to reach the nearby river. Over the ensuing week, residents were told not to use their water for anything but flushing toilets while schools and government buildings were closed, as well as any businesses which relied on water.

The water ban was lifted once tests showed that water

from the treatment plant was below a 1-part-per-million threshold established by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). However, the strong licorice-like smell of crude MCHM lingers in much of the water supply. Outside experts continue to warn that the chemicals released in the spill may have been absorbed into the pipes and components of home plumbing systems and are now leeching out into the clean water being delivered through the distribution system.

At a press conference last Wednesday, West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin initially rejected the idea of conducting home testing of the water as impractical due to the cost. “There’s not a hesitancy to do it, but there’s a cost associated to it,” he told reporters. “Trying to test a hundred thousand customers could be in the tens of millions of dollars.”

Within hours of the press conference, however, Tomblin announced he would direct his task force to look into the issue, underscoring the political crisis engulfing the administration as the social disaster unleashed from the spill continues a month on.

On Tuesday, the Tomblin administration announced details of its plan. Tests will be conducted in ten homes, one in each of the nine affected counties, along with an additional home in Kanawha County. After the preliminary results of this sample are released, an additional 100 homes will be selected for testing.

This amounts to testing 0.1 percent of the roughly 100,000 affected customers. Some experts have already warned that such a small sample size may render any results statistically useless, especially considering the wide area involved and the variety of home plumbing systems.

Until now, tests have only been conducted at WVAW’s treatment plant, area fire hydrants, and some public buildings, such as schools, which continue to operate with hand sanitizer and bottled water for everything from drinking, cooking, and washing desks. School officials are unable to say how long the supply of bottled water will last.

Initially, area schools were reopened once tests at the water company showed the water entering the distribution system was at the CDC’s 1 ppm threshold, and county health officials conducted health inspections to ensure that water filters were changed and each school’s distribution system had been properly flushed according to the guidelines issued by WVAW.

However, several schools had to be abruptly reclosed after the chemical was detected even after being initially cleared by tests. The state then set a stricter 10 parts-per-billion threshold—what it considers the “non-detect” level— for schools to be reopened. Between Wednesday and Friday last week, some schools in Kanawha County had to be closed with tests continuing to show the presence of the chemical

above 10 ppb.

Other schools were closed last week, even though water tested at the state’s “non-detect” level, due to the pungent smell which persists in the water and can be detected according to some studies at concentrations as low as 1 ppb. According to a West Virginia Department of Education spokeswoman, however, there are currently no plans to conduct air quality tests at schools.

According to the *Charleston Gazette*, five schools in Kanawha County were closed on Wednesday and Thursday last week due to the odor, with students and teachers complaining of nausea and eye irritation while faucets were being flushed. On Thursday and Friday alone, 18 schools in Kanawha County reported the odor.

Just as officials previously tried to dismiss the hundreds of hospital visits due to contact and ingestion of the tainted water as a product of the flu and virus season, attempts are now being made to discount reported illness from the chemical’s odor.

“The screening levels that we’ve recommended and have been confirmed are the ones that allowed people to use the water without harm from MCHM,” claimed CDC environmental health director Dr. Tanja Popovic last week. “It’s very hard for me to say now that these symptoms are associated with MCHM, when the levels are non-detectable.”

However, the tests being conducted, and the thresholds set by the CDC and the state, are associated with a safe ingestion, not inhalation, level for which there exists little information. The material safety data sheet issued by Eastman Chemical, the manufacturer of crude MCHM, says only that “at elevated temperatures, vapor may cause irritation of eyes and respiratory tract.”

For its part, WVAW—a subsidiary of American Water worth more than \$7 billion—announced on Friday that it will be sending its residential customers a credit for \$10.29 for water they might have used to flush their systems. Company president Jeff McIntyre said further compensation would most likely not be forthcoming, as any additional flushing performed by customers would be for the “aesthetic issues” associated with the lingering odor.



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