

FEMA cuts aid to West Virginians affected by chemical spill

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Federal officials have denied continued aid to West Virginia residents a little more than a month after a massive chemical leak resulted in the contamination of nearly 300,000 individuals' bathing and drinking water.

Last week, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) deputy associate administrator Elizabeth Zimmerman sent West Virginia Governor Ray Tomblin a letter declaring that "[b]ased on our review of all the information available, it has been determined that the event was not of such severity and magnitude as to warrant grant assistance under this emergency declaration." The agency gave state officials 30 days to appeal the decision.

The letter was in response to a January 27 request for continued aid to West Virginia residents, many of whom still are without potable drinking or bathing sources. The aid extension, called Category B, would include meals as well as bottled water to residents as they continue to struggle to obtain means for sanitation and health in the dead of winter.

Just days before the request for continued aid went out last month there were reports of the leaked chemical compound, crude MCHM, still being detected in West Virginia's water supply, as well as the presence of a second substance, whose existence initially went unnoticed. (See: "Problems remain as water is restored in West Virginia")

Speaking on the decision to remove aid, FEMA spokesman Dan Watson explained that "[w]hile the initial emergency declaration was approved and resources were provided to support the immediate response, it was determined in this case certain costs ... were not beyond the response and recovery capabilities of state and local governments."

The economic impact of the disaster alone is said to

be costing restaurants and businesses \$1 million per day. The governor's office has calculated that the total cost to the state and municipalities has already amounted to over \$2 million. What is more, should the aid have been extended, West Virginia residents would have been required to repay up to 25 percent of the total amount given by FEMA through back taxes.

In Kanawha County alone, the main area affected by the spill, it is expected that local residents will have to pay \$500,000 in back taxes for the "aid."

It was reported last week that state officials were forced to remove cases of Ice Mountain bottled water, which had been donated by FEMA, from several local middle schools after students detected a "musty" and "strong odor" in the beverage.

"The bottled water program has been in contact with the manufacturer regarding the taste and odor concerns and samples have been submitted to the company for further testing and investigation. It is believed that the odor is related to where the water bottles were stored prior to being donated to West Virginia's schools," said a spokesperson for the State Department of Health and Human Resources.

The attitude of federal officials to the circumstances faced by West Virginia residents is identical as the company responsible for the leak, Freedom Industries. In response to the disaster, the company promptly filed for bankruptcy, exempting itself from payment for any of the damages incurred by its refusal to properly store its chemicals.

It was reported in the *Washington Post* last week that the site where Freedom Industries relocated its chemical storage after the original leak was detected itself has been cited for violations by the Department of Environmental Protection, due to the same lax methods for containing its dangerous compounds.

From the 2010 BP oil spill, to the Big Branch mine cave-in the same year, the Obama Administration has done everything in its power to shelter negligent energy corporations and help them to defend their profits, while simultaneously slashing funding for regulatory agencies, as well as benefits to those affected by industrial disasters. The 2014 budget of the Environmental Protection Agency is expected to result in a 20 percent reduction in its number of compliance and civil enforcement inspections in comparison to 2012 levels.



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