

Residents speak on continued water problems in West Virginia

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West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin announced Friday that he was ending the “state of emergency” that has been in effect for the past 50 days following the chemical spill which poisoned the water for 300,000 West Virginians. The January 9 leak at Freedom Industries’ Etowah terminal on the Elk River released 10,000 gallons of coal processing chemicals, including crude MCHM and polyglycol ethers, or PPH, which made their way into the region’s main water intake just downstream.

Tomblin’s announcement comes about two weeks after the Obama administration rejected the state’s request for additional relief funding. In denying the state’s request, deputy associate administrator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Elizabeth Zimmerman stated, “Based 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.” (See: FEMA cuts aid to West Virginians affected by chemical spill)

West Virginians continue to face hardships associated with the spill. Residents of Charleston, West Virginia spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* at one of the remaining distribution sites where residents are supposed to be able to get clean water. However, the tanker was empty and had been that way since at least the day before according to residents.

“I just live right across here and every time I come down, and I do it at least once a day, it’s not maintained. So it’s kind of just been sitting here on the honor system,” explained Clint. “It was empty yesterday and I have no idea when it is going to be refilled... I haven’t been able to get anyone on the phone.”

Residents arrived frustrated, many having also been to other distribution tankers in nearby Cross Lanes and Dunbar which were also empty. “I don’t understand this. Why are they empty?” added Clint’s wife, who claims to be still breaking out because of the water.

The stream of residents seeking water from the tankers underscores the concerns which remain over the water’s safety and the widespread need for potable water despite the

tapering of access over the past few weeks. In particular, teachers and students continue to report the pungent licorice smell associated with crude MCHM in area schools, and a “rapid response team” which has been set up to investigate complaints over the water continues to be called out.

On Friday, Kanawha County Schools Superintendent Ron Duerring announced that schools in the county will resume “normal operating conditions” including the use of tap water on Monday. Duerring claimed that bottled water would remain available “as long as supplies last,” shifting the burden for future bottled water onto parents.

Clint claims the smell has reappeared in his water three times. “We had the smell that was strong for about a week. It went away. It was gone for about two weeks. It came back for a period of three days and then reappeared again this Monday. And it’s a strange kind of licorice smell,” he explained. “For the life of me I can’t understand why something would reappear after being flushed. Now we’ve flushed it to where I’m probably going to get the water bill from heck,” Clint said.

West Virginia American Water (WVAW), the owner and operator of the region’s distribution system, is offering its residential customers a credit for \$10.29 in compensation for the flushing it claims was required to clean home plumbing systems. Some residents have complained of receiving water bills in the hundreds of dollars as the water company continues to rule out further compensation, claiming any additional flushing performed by customers would be for the “aesthetic issues” associated with the lingering odor.

WVAW is a subsidiary of utility giant American Water Works—the nation’s largest for-profit water utility, servicing more than 11 million people in 16 states. In its recent filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, American Water claimed \$2.9 billion in revenue and more than \$369 million in net profits last year. The company’s CEO, Jeffry Sterba, took home \$3.7 million in compensation in 2012.

Outside scientists continue to warn that the chemicals released in the spill may have been absorbed into the pipes of home plumbing systems and are now leeching out into the

clean water being delivered through the distribution system. The Tomblin administration has announced plans to test 110 homes throughout the region, or about 0.1 percent of the 100,000 affected customers, a sample size some experts say will render any results statistically useless.

“If we’re being sold that this is something in the system that can be flushed out, then why is it reappearing because this is the third time it has reappeared?” Clint asked. “That doesn’t make any sense. Is it laying somewhere? ...I wonder if it can bond on a molecular level to the metal of the pipes. Does it bond with the copper or does it bond with the plastic? Or, and this is what I think they are holding back on, is it the water tanks? Because you can have water that doesn’t smell like it and when it’s heated you get the vapor. The process of heating it apparently releases the vapor.”

Little remains known about the long-term health effects of exposure to crude MCHM, something which concerns residents like Clint. “Since when can you not get any information about the human interaction with a known chemical?” he asked. “Is it a cumulative chemical? I mean where are the right questions being asked? If it was cumulative, does it build up over time like in daily exposure? They could easily tell us like, ‘Well drink it now,’...[but] what about drinking it for the next month? Is that going to build up in the body? Is it a carcinogen? I couldn’t find that information out.”

In closing, Clint expressed appreciation to the *World Socialist Web Site* for continuing to cover the situation in West Virginia. “Well it’s good to see somebody taking attention,” he said. “I wondered. .. this has went on for so long and I didn’t really feel like we got very much national attention at all. There’s been a couple of pieces on it, but not much, not much at all... I made jokes in the first 48 hours about how this is the precursor to the zombie apocalypse just to have fun with it, but then it got—no, this isn’t fun anymore.”

Asked about her concerns over the water, Mary replied, “I don’t feel comfortable drinking it or cooking with it. I shower in it, wash clothes in it, that kind of thing, but I don’t want to drink it. I don’t want my kids to drink it. I don’t want my pets to drink it... There’s just so much uncertainty. You know they tell pregnant women not to drink it. They say it’s acceptable. They don’t say it’s safe.”

“My youngest son is 19 and he’s still at home,” she added, “and I don’t want him to drink it. I keep telling him I don’t want two-headed grandchildren.”

Mary’s son is working as a lifeguard in preparation to join the US Navy and had to miss nearly three weeks of work due to the water problems. “On a lot of levels, a lot of people have lost a lot of income. It did not affect me directly, but I know dozens of people that it did.”

“I don’t think they’d drink the water if they were here,” claimed Mary about the Obama administration’s rejection of additional aid. “I think they should put themselves in our shoes and be more helpful. If this had happened in New York City or someplace like that there would be complete and total outrage. But it’s just, you know, little Charleston, West Virginia and they’ll be alright.”

“Initially, everybody was very good about handing out bottled water and that type of thing,” she explained. “Then it cut down to these tankers and until today I’ve never had trouble getting water out of one of these. I’ve never been to this one before. There’s one in Cross Lanes I usually use but it caused a sink hole in a parking lot yesterday so they closed that one down.”

Bob, a local mechanic, explained that he has to shower in the water out of necessity for his job, but doesn’t drink it and doesn’t know when he’ll trust the water again.

“I think that kind of sucks right there myself,” Bob said regarding the Obama administration’s rejection of further aid. “We pay our taxes and everything and they should try to take care of the people one way or the other.”

Bob also expressed skepticism about Governor Tomblin’s plans to do limited home testing. “I seen in the news where they were wanting to in different places, start checking it and everything,” he said. “What good’s it going to do? It’s still in there, or a lot of people think it’s still in there.”

“I still have problems, you know, concerning this, the safety,” claimed Carol, a retired worker from the chemical industry. “I wash my dishes with the tap water, the hot, but then to rinse them I use the water that comes from the tanks.”

“I don’t have the smell,” she added, “it’s just other, you know...you just can’t tell when a chemical is in there. It may look clear, but that’s not always safe.”



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