High levels of toxic chemicals found in drinking water of west Michigan community

Carlos Delgado
28 July 2018

Approximately 3,000 residents in and around Parchment, Michigan, a city north of Kalamazoo, were told by city officials Thursday to immediately stop consuming water from the municipal supply after it was found to contain high levels of toxic per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), which have been linked to severe health effects.

The announcement was made after testing conducted by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) measured PFAS levels at 1410 parts per trillion (ppt), over 20 times greater than the 70 ppt defined as the official "advisory level" by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). City officials announced that the water was unsafe for drinking, cooking, using for baby formula, or even washing fruits and vegetables. Boiling the water does not remove the chemicals, nor do most drinking water filters.

PFAS chemicals have been linked to a wide array of health problems, including kidney and testicular cancer, liver and thyroid damage, increased cholesterol levels, immune system suppression, and developmental delays in children. Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to health effects from PFAS exposure, which can lead to pregnancy-induced hypertension, infertility, and low fetal birth weight.

City officials announced that the Parchment water supply would be "flushed" and that affected residents would be connected to Kalamazoo's water supply until PFAS levels were lowered. A water distribution site was set up at Parchment High School, where residents have been receiving cases of bottled water. However, as of this writing, no announcement has been made as to the source of the contamination, nor of any plans to address this source.

PFAS chemicals have been widely used for industrial and manufacturing purposes for decades and have been known to leach into drinking water supplies from industrial waste. Parchment, named for its connection to paper manufacturing, was the location of the Crown Vantage paper mill that operated in the city until 2000. A report released last May by the Environmental Defense Fund noted that paper mills are "a significant source of PFAS contamination" due to their use in the manufacture of food packaging. Many mills are known to dump PFAS-contaminated waste directly into rivers.

PFAS chemicals were first used for manufacturing purposes in 1951. By 1961, chemical giant DuPont had become aware that exposure to the chemical compounds caused liver damage in mice. DuPont's own health research in the 1990s linked PFAS exposure to tumors and other health effects in lab animals.

Despite decades of research linking PFAS exposure to various health effects, the EPA has not issued regulations targeting PFASs, nor listed PFAS chemicals as hazardous substances under the Clean Water Act. In 2012, the EPA required some water systems to test for PFAS contamination, but Parchment was exempted from this because its water system served fewer than 10,000 people.

Though some companies like 3M have attempted to phase out the use of toxic PFAS chemicals, the extremely strong, "long-chain" chemical structure of these compounds ensures that the PFASs that have already been fabricated will persist in the environment indefinitely. Dumping sites can continue to pose a serious health risk for years or even decades after industrial operations cease. PFAS chemicals are bio-accumulative, meaning they can build up to dangerous levels as a result of long term exposure.

As of this writing, no announcement has been made as to when Parchment's water supply was first contaminated by PFAS.

© World Socialist Web Site

Parchment is the latest in a growing number of cities and communities across the US and internationally, including Flint, Michigan and Martin County, Kentucky, where residents have been exposed to severely contaminated drinking water. Parchment is only 60 miles away from Plainfield Charter Township, where a Wolverine tanning dump had contaminated the local drinking water with extremely high PFAS levels for years.

The state of Michigan has identified at least 20 different communities that have PFAS contamination sites, mostly near current and former industrial sites and military bases.

Exposure to dangerously high levels of PFAS chemicals is a nationwide and even worldwide phenomenon. A 2016 report from Environmental Working Group researchers analyzing EPA data found that unsafe levels of PFAS chemicals contaminate the water of approximately 5.2 million Americans.

A lawsuit filed by the state of Minnesota against chemical manufacturing giant 3M documented the existence of a cancer cluster in Oakdale, Minnesota, where PFAS waste from 3M's operations contaminated the water supply. Twenty-one children who attended high school in the city were diagnosed with cancer, a rate 171 times higher than the US average. Five of those children later died.

In Australia, areas surrounding 18 military bases and airports have been found to be contaminated with PFAS chemicals from fire-fighting foam, affecting thousands of residents. In response, the Australian government issued a whitewash report last May minimizing the effects of PFAS exposure in order to shield the government from liability, which would amount in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Parchment residents expressed shock and outrage that their drinking water had been contaminated.

"I've lived around here for a while. The James River [paper company] has contaminated the area. Lots of companies have been dumping here forever, but they sure aren't going to admit it now, are they," a 40-year-old Parchment resident told the WSWS.

"I'm not worried about myself, I'm worried for my 11-month-old nephew. He's been drinking formula mixed with the tap water. How long has this poisoning been going on? The paper mills have been out of here for years now, and I'd like to know who's going pay for this."

Steve Vandiver, a resident, told MLive.com, "It's not the type of thing you want to wake up to, to find out you've been drinking poison … My concern is, what are the long-term ramifications of this? The numbers they used are ridiculously high and I'm concerned about my family."

Vandiver brought a protest sign to the bottled water distribution center which read, "How long have you been poisoning my water?"

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site