

Majority of West Virginia counties rank worst in US for water quality

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Nearly two-thirds of all counties in West Virginia have among the worst one-third of water systems in terms of drinking water quality and record of compliance in the United States, a new study finds.

“Watered Down Justice,” an analysis published September 24 by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Coming Clean and the Environmental Justice Health Alliance focuses on the concentration of water quality violations in areas with sizeable racial, ethnic and linguistic minority populations. The report uses the federal Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) violation records.

The report maps counties by severity and length of time in violation as well as the racial composition of affected populations. Virtually every urban area and most of the Southwest US are rated as severely impacted by poor water quality.

The environmental justice groups designate minority populations in terms of the World Health Organization’s definition of “vulnerability,” a condition measured by “the degree to which a population, individual, or organization is unable to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impacts of disasters.”

The data in the NRDC report is a staggering documentation of widespread water quality problems across every region of the United States. Between June 1, 2016 and May 31, 2019, the report found 170,959 violations of the SDWA by 24,133 water systems.

Nearly 40 percent of the American population—129,907,275 people—were found to be obtaining water from these systems.

The health threats associated with these violations include “cancer, impaired brain development, decreased kidney function, and potentially life-threatening gastrointestinal disease.” The report cites Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 19.5 million Americans are sickened each year from E. coli and other pathogens contaminating public water systems.

Additionally, the report found 5,634 water systems serving 44,980,846 people that had racked up 23,040 of the most severe health-based violations. These violations are strongly associated with cancers and other fatal conditions, birth defects, and compromised fertility.

As bad as these figures are, the report stresses that it is “likely that the full scope of the problem is much bigger,” since samples were taken only at the “point of entry” into the distribution systems, not in the pipes where other contaminants can enter.

Moreover, the EPA regulates only a “small subset of drinking water contaminants, and the agency has failed to adopt a single

new standard for an unregulated contaminant since 1996.”

That is, across the federal administrations of both Republicans and Democrats, water quality has been allowed to deteriorate and regulations have been undermined on behalf of corporate polluters. These are deliberate policies pursued on behalf of capitalist ruling class interests. Critical infrastructure has collapsed while trillions of dollars in public funding has been siphoned off for tax cuts for the wealthy, handouts to Wall Street, and waging wars. Currently the American Society of Civil Engineers grades the overall condition of US infrastructure as a D+.

What becomes clear from the sheer scale of the numbers in the report is that far more is involved than discrimination or concentrated poverty among racial, ethnic or linguistic minority groups.

West Virginia

In reality, it is the working class, regardless of skin pigmentation or country of birth, that is vulnerable to the hazards created by economic privation, deregulation, and deteriorating social infrastructure.

In fact, many of the photographs and anecdotes used in the report come out of West Virginia, one of the “whitest” states in the US, with a population that has been regularly vilified and scapegoated for the election of President Donald Trump. West Virginia is also among the poorest states in the country.

Given a special highlight in the report is the disastrous 2014 Freedom Industries chemical spill outside Charleston, West Virginia, that left 300,000 people across 9 counties without safe tap water. For years, the water has remained tainted with the toxin 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol.

That disaster was made possible by a virtual absence of regulation. Between 1991 and 2014, the site had been inspected by the state only three times; the only state regulatory requirement on Freedom Industries was a quarterly report on rain runoff that the company filled out itself.

“Charleston and other West Virginia residents face a wide variety of chemical threats to their drinking water, health, and daily safety,” states the report, adding that the Charleston area has “13 high-risk chemical facilities included in the Environmental

Protection Agency's Risk Management Plan program, which covers industrial and commercial facilities that use or store extremely hazardous chemicals that create constant risk of a catastrophe."

Charleston area residents also "face the highest cancer risk from toxic air pollutants of all nine areas studied in Life at the Fenceline," the NRDC report notes, citing an earlier study by Earth Justice for All. That study found 70 percent of Charleston residents live within 3 miles of a high-risk chemical facility.

Across the state, communities have been under boil water advisories for years, with residents in the dark over what was wrong with the water. The state's streams and rivers are massively polluted from a century of virtually unregulated mining and chemical production waste. Of 448 water systems in the state, the NRDC report found 378 of them in violation of federal regulations over the past three years.

West Virginia Governor Jim Justice—a Republican-turned-Democrat-turned-Republican billionaire coal boss, the largest landowner east of the Mississippi River who is a substantial polluter in his own right—frequently pitches the state as an unsullied natural area. On September 20, Justice appeared on the news talk show Fox and Friends to decry "hysteria" over climate change that would "destroy America." "If you want pristine air, if you want pristine water, come to West Virginia," he insisted.

Meanwhile, the state legislature has systematically weakened environmental regulations, including water pollution rules, on behalf of the West Virginia Manufacturers Association—dominated by the giant chemical companies DuPont and Dow Chemical.

In March, Senate Bill 163 passed by a bipartisan 78-22 vote in the House of Delegates, introducing a state version of the weakened EPA updates to water standards, going even further to undo regulation over pollution discharge into streams and rivers. The Aboveground Storage Tank Act, a reaction to the Freedom Industries spill, was also rolled back.

The legislature heard the bill in committee with barely a public notice, according to a letter signed by representatives from 23 environmental and economic policy organizations. "We had only a few hours' notice before the bill ran," the letter stated, "and then were advised by your staff that concerns/testimony would only be accepted in writing, and after your committee had already voted on a committee substitute for the bill."

A West Virginia Public Broadcasting report cited water quality experts who said the bill turned regulation on carcinogens back to outdated health standards set in the 1980s and 1990s.

The state's West Virginia Infrastructure and Jobs Development Council has estimated the state would need to invest at least \$4 billion to repair aging water systems.

The 2014 Freedom Industries disaster was only one in a long line of chemical spills in the Charleston area. In 2010, a DuPont gas release killed one worker. In 2008, two workers were killed in an explosion at a Bayer CropScience plant.

Indeed, the stretch of the Kanawha River heading west out of the city is known as "Chemical Valley" for its major chemical industry concentration. The towns of nearby Institute and Nitro, named after the gunpowder component manufactured there in mass quantities during World War I, have been the sites of

numerous explosions and spills over the years. Nitro was also the site of Monsanto's Agent Orange production from the 1940s through the early 1970s. Today, at least 4,500 homes in the area are contaminated with dioxin dust, which Monsanto has been court ordered to clean.

As terrible as the recent disasters have been, the risk of far greater disasters looms large. Shrapnel launched by the 2008 Bayer explosion, for example, nearly punctured an aboveground storage tank containing a stockpile of methyl isocyanate (MIC), a chemical used to make pesticides.

That tank, owned by Union Carbide, is the only US location of that chemical, which was responsible for thousands of deaths in Bhopal, India in 1984. Federal investigators found that, as a result of the Bayer explosion, the entire central West Virginia area had come very close to a Bhopal-level catastrophe.

Far from increasing regulation to prevent such a tragedy, the political establishment has moved in the opposite direction. Deregulation and tax enticements for more industrial investment have been the single-minded focus of the ruling class at all levels. In fact, the natural gas boom across the eastern US over the past several years has increased the likelihood that even more catastrophic spills are likely.

"We are seeing a renaissance now because of Marcellus Shale," Kevin DiGregorio, executive director of the Chemical Alliance Zone who lobbies for the West Virginia chemical industry, excitedly told National Geographic in a 2014 interview.

The danger of chemical spills is not simply a West Virginia problem. Nationwide, thousands of aboveground storage facilities leak into drinking water systems every year. Between 2005 and 2014, the NRDC report notes, at least 20,432 hazardous substance spills were recorded across the country.

Access to clean drinking water is a social right. It is not a luxury to be enjoyed by the privileged few while denied to millions in the name of capitalist enterprise. In order that water systems across the country be run as truly public utilities, they must be taken under genuine public control, run democratically and with complete transparency. Companies responsible for ruining the water supplies should be expropriated, their profits seized to invest in restoring water quality and providing health care for the populations they have harmed.



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