

Delaware River chemical spill impacts drinking water in the Philadelphia region

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28 March 2023

A chemical spill in Bristol, Pennsylvania accidentally leaked about 8,100 gallons of a latex emulsion product into the Delaware River. The facility where it was leaked from is owned by Trinseo PLC and is located about 23 miles north of Philadelphia, center of the country's seventh-largest metro area with over six million people.

At 11:40 p.m. on Friday March 24, 2023, water-soluble acrylic polymer solution that contained methyl methacrylate, butyl acrylate and ethyl acrylate leaked into Otter Creek, a tributary of the Delaware River. The Delaware River provides billions of gallons of water to people living in Philadelphia and surrounding areas. The chemicals that were spilled are used in the making of plexiglas and similar products, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "are also all regarded as hazardous to humans."

Butyl acrylate is one of the toxic chemicals released in the East Palestine, Ohio train derailment. Detection of it in the Ohio River prompted authorities in Cincinnati, hundreds of miles away from the accident, to shut off the water system's intakes on the river, citing an "abundance of caution."

According to the New Jersey Department of Health, butyl acrylate is a "clear, colorless liquid with a fruity, strong odor. It is used in the manufacture of polymers and resins, and in paint formulations.

"Contact can irritate and burn the skin and eyes. Inhaling Butyl Acrylate can irritate the nose, throat and lungs causing coughing, wheezing and/or shortness of breath. Exposure to Butyl Acrylate can cause headache, dizziness, nausea and vomiting." The long-term health effects of butyl acrylate "can last for months and years."

In response to this danger, the city of Philadelphia waited nearly a day and a half before making any

statements on the potential threat by this spill. Many citizens were first notified of the accident by a news article published on Sunday March 26, 2023. The article featured comments from city official Mike Carroll, who suggested that "we cannot be 100 percent sure that there won't be traces of these chemicals in the tap water throughout the afternoon... Therefore, we are notifying the public in the customer service area that they may wish not to drink or cook with tap water."

City residents panicked when confronted with the news, and there was a run for bottled water. "The scene in the aisles was reminiscent of only two other times in recent history — the Eagles' Super Bowl parade in 2018 and the early days of the pandemic," wrote the *Inquirer* newspaper.

Fair Mart grocery store, near downtown Philadelphia, reported that it had sold out of water "immediately Monday morning," after being closed early Sunday. "They knew the Fairmount store closed at 1 p.m. Sunday — around the same time city residents got their first alert about switching to bottled water due to a chemical spill — and likely still had cases and jugs in stock," reported the *Inquirer*.

However, by nightfall on Sunday the city reversed their advisory and declared that the tap water remained safe to drink until Monday 11:59 p.m. This has since been extended to 11:59 p.m on Wednesday March 29.

On Tuesday March 28, Philadelphia's Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney said during his press conference that Philadelphia's tap water was safe to drink and was not impacted by the chemical spill, and that he could "confidently" say that the threat had passed. "I am grateful that no residents were exposed to unsafe chemicals in the city's tap water following the spill," he declared. But he also blatantly lied in his remarks about "the swift action, caution, and preparedness" of

his administration in confronting the crisis.

The Trinseo-Altuglas LLC plant in Bristol has a history of at least four spills of similar chemicals in the recent past. Prior to Trinseo's ownership of this plant, it was owned by a company called Arkema which was investigated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for a "release" of 1,760 pounds of methane methacrylate in 2010. Subsequently, it was again investigated for releases of butyl acrylate and ethyl acrylate in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2021. The EPA issued a corrective action plan for a 60-acre area encompassing the plant because it was "contaminated with a variety of organic and inorganic chemicals."

Rutgers University associate professor of chemistry David Salas-de la Cruz told the *Inquirer* the frequency of spills was "a lot. That's not normal... That's too many incidents involving similar chemicals."



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