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Importance: High

West Virginia Rural Water Association Official: Risk Posed by Dry Cleaning Chemical in Paden City Water Is Minimal

By Alex Meyer
March 16, 2019

PADEN CITY — Lew Baker, sourcewater specialist with the West Virginia Rural Water Association, likened the danger presented by an excess of a dry cleaning chemical found in Paden City's drinking water to "driving 55 mph in a 50 zone."

Paden City officials announced last week that the chemical tetrachloroethylene, also called perchloroethylene or PCE, had a concentration of 5.5 parts per billion in the city's drinking water supply. The maximum allowable contaminant level for the chemical set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is 5.0 ppb.

"It's not necessarily a huge increase and risk," Baker said. "There's not really any extra steps (residents) should take. I wouldn't."

That said, the excess of PCE does present long-term health risks, and the city, along with state and federal agencies, is taking steps to bring contamination levels down.

Paden City Mayor Clyde Hochstrasser said the city found contamination at one of its wells about six months ago, which the city then shut down. Two more wells began showing contamination "just recently," he said.

Due to the contamination, Paden City received a "notice of violation" from the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health. That agency, along with the EPA and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, stepped in to mitigate the problem.

The EPA determined the source of the contamination to be a former dry cleaning facility, DEP spokesman Terry Fletcher said. That facility is the now-closed Band Box Cleaners, which operated in Paden City for decades and closed about 16-18 years ago, Hochstrasser said.

"It poses no major threat at this time," Hochstrasser said. "We are being proactive and are working to reduce our levels."

The EPA will take the lead on the investigation and remediation of the source of the chemical, with the DEP providing support and guidance, Fletcher said.

"The EPA plans to conduct additional phases of (evaluation) to better characterize local groundwater movement and the extent of contamination, as well as evaluate additional potential sources," Fletcher said.

According to the EPA, some people who drink water containing PCE at excess levels for "many years" could have problems with their liver and may have an increased risk of getting cancer.

"PCE is likely carcinogenic to humans," Fletcher said.

However, Baker said research suggests that risk of cancer is extremely minimal. Someone's odds of getting cancer from PCE in their drinking water would increase by one in 1 million if they consumed 17 ppb of the chemical over a lifetime, according to the Agency of Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

The state Bureau for Public Health could not be reached for comment Friday regarding health risks the contamination presents.

Since the city discovered the problem last year, it has worked with Baker and the Rural Water Association to find attainable solutions. The organization works to assist drinking water infrastructure systems in towns across the state.

Baker said Paden City has had problems with excess carbon dioxide in its water wells in the past. Because of that, though, it already has some systems in place to remove chemicals through aeration.

"Groundwater can have a bit of fizz to it," Baker said. "Carbon dioxide, if it goes out to customers in pipes, can cause corrosion of plumbing. One of the things to do to minimize that is the same thing to do with soda pop: expose it to air."

Paden City's wells use air strippers, or devices that move air through the water to reduce contamination. The city plans to increase use of the air strippers to reduce PCE levels, Baker said.

The city is also considering other solutions to lower the PCE level, such as placing extraction wells near existing wells to divert chemicals away from them, updating the air strippers to make them more efficient and adding a sprinkler system inside the tanks that would help dissipate contaminants, Hochstrasser said.

"The main thing is it's OK because this is a known problem," Baker said. "They're working on it, already minimizing it to some extent."