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EPA: Still trying to estimate scope of spill

By Ken Ward Jr.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Government investigators are still trying to determine exactly how much of a toxic chemical spilled from the Freedom Industries tank farm along the Elk River, how much of that material soaked into the ground and how much could later leach into the water, a top U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official said this evening.

"An investigation is going on to figure out where there might be any materials in the ground, and so far that investigation is still going on," EPA regional administrator Shawn Garvin told The Charleston Gazette.

Garvin's remarks were EPA's first significant public comments about the spill last Thursday that fouled drinking water supplies for 300,000 people across a nine-county region around Charleston.

Over the last four years, EPA has become an almost-constant punching bag for West Virginia's coal industry and the politicians who support it.

Mining officials and elected leaders repeatedly denounce what they call a "war on coal," and blast EPA regulatory and enforcement efforts as "federal overreach."

But in the ongoing crisis since the chemical spill, EPA officials are nowhere to be found prior to Garvin's interview. Agency officials may be working behind the scenes, but they've not appeared at government briefings and have refused numerous interview requests.

On Tuesday, a spokeswoman for EPA administrator Gina McCarthy provided this prepared statement:

"EPA continues to work closely with other federal and state agencies in West Virginia as they begin implementing a plan for getting the water system back on line," said the statement, provided by EPA press officer Alisha Johnson.

The statement continued, "The State of West Virginia and the West Virginia American Water Company (WVAWC) are developing a plan for flushing the system, along with sampling and analysis, that will allow residents to begin using their water as soon as possible. State and Federal (ATSDR/CDC) health officials have agreed that a level of 1 part per million (ppm) of methylcyclohexanemethanol is protective of public health and the State/WVAWC will use the flushing process to assure that the 1 ppm level is achieved throughout the system.

"The EPA supports this approach and has offered sampling and monitoring assistance to the State during the restart efforts," the statement said.

The Charleston Gazette asked to interview EPA officials who are assisting in all aspects of the agency's response -- from water sampling to cleanup to determining what level of the chemical

was safe.
Like the CDC and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, EPA has so far declined to make any of its officials available for interviews.
Asked why, Johnson told the Gazette, "Our role right now is very limited. As we look at this, we are looking at where we have a role. Right now, that has not been determined."
EPA regional officials in Philadelphia have also refused to answer questions from the Gazette, and have not appeared at any media briefings. Late last week, calls to EPA's regional offices were bounced between several different public affairs officers.
Eventually, Terri White, EPA's top regional spokeswoman, said in an email message Friday afternoon, "EPA is closely monitoring the chemical spill in Charleston and is working closely with FEMA and other federal partners who are responding to the incident.
"The Agency has deployed on-scene coordinators to assist with water sampling and stands ready to offer additional assistance to the State of West Virginia, who is leading the response on the spill," the message said.
Asked again this week for an interview with an EPA official involved in the incident response, White said in another email message, "Given that EPA's "on-scene coordinator is not the on-scene coordinator for the incident, you'll need to speak with state officials."
Despite promises from President Obama that his would be a transparent administration, the Obama EPA has been criticized by groups including the Society of Environmental Journalists and the Union of Concerned Scientists for not being open with the press, the public and the scientific community.
Republican leaders in Congress have also seized on the agency's closed-door policies in their efforts to clamp down on EPA regulatory efforts.
Earlier this week, Sen. Jay Rockefeller urged the EPA and the CDC to launch a study of the potential long-term impacts of the spill and its aftermath.
On Wednesday, EPA officials unveiled a website titled, "Charleston WV Chemical Leak" which lists its on-scene coordinators, but provides few details about what EPA is or isn't doing.
"All over its website the EPA calls itself a public health agency," said Celeste Monforton, a public health researcher with George Washington University. "A key tenet of public health is communicating openly with the public and being present to respond to public concern -- even when it doesn't have all the answers.
"EPA's failure to do so damaged the public confidence that EPA has the community's best interests in mind," Monforton said Wednesday.
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