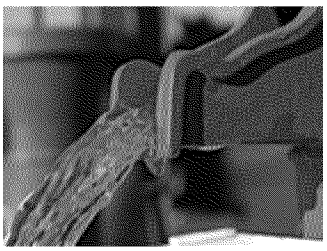
To: Allgeier, Steve[Allgeier.Steve@epa.gov]; Hedrick, Elizabeth[Hedrick.Elizabeth@epa.gov]
From: Travers, David
Sent: Thur 2/6/2014 3:00:19 PM
Subject: Water Safe to Drink, Governor Tells West Virginians Affected by Spill

Drinking Water

Water Safe to Drink, Governor Tells West Virginians Affected by Spill



By Bebe Raupe

Feb. 5 — West Virginia residents affected by the recent Elk River chemical spill should trust federal regulators' assurances that their drinking water is safe, according to Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin (D).

Under the Safe Drinking Water Act, Environmental Protection Agency experts have examined the distribution system and determined that levels of 4-methylcyclohexane methanol (MCHM) in tap water are at safe or even undetectable levels, said Region 3 Administrator Shawn M. Garvin, who joined Tomblin at a news briefing Feb. 5 in Charleston.

Ongoing anecdotal reports of illness from tap water following the Jan. 9 spill, which prompted a weeklong "do not use" order for 300,000 people in nine counties, can't be definitively linked to MCHM, said Center for Environmental Health Acting Director Tanja Popovic, adding that the limit of 1,000 parts per million established by her agency provides "a substantial blanket of safety."

The safety limit, devised in the days following the spill, is based on the scant existing research on MCHM, Popovic said; the exposure limit for animals was reduced by a factor of 10 twice, yielding an acceptable "no harm" limit for all humans, including pregnant women and the chronically ill.

Although many West Virginians continue to express fears about the tap water, Tomblin said state and federal scientists "have taken several thousand samples already" to ensure its safety and will continue to do so.

Moreover, Tomblin said he and his staff are drinking the water, adding, "All we can rely on is what the experts tell us."

Federal Concern

Because so little is known about MCHM, West Virginia Secretary of State Natalie Tennant urged Congress Feb. 4 to fund a 10-year study proposed by the Centers for Disease Control and Protection to monitor the long-term health of those exposed to the chemical through public water supplies (24 DEN A-4, 2/5/14).

Tennant spoke at a hearing held to gather input on the Chemical Safety and Drinking Water Protection Act of 2014 (S. 1961), which was introduced Jan. 27 by West Virginia Sens. Joe Manchin (D) and Jay Rockefeller (D), along with Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee (19 DEN A-2, 1/29/14).

At Feb. 4 hearings in the House and Senate, lawmakers said the spill illustrates the need for updating the Toxic Substances Control Act

Eleven days after the spill Tomblin announced legislation to give the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP) "tools" to prevent another similar incident (14 DEN A-13, 1/22/14).

Tomblin's chemical storage regulatory program (S.B. 373) would require storage tank owners and operators to develop spill prevention and response plans for each tank that would be subject to approval by the WVDEP. Those plans must disclose the activities of the storage facilities as well as an inventory of substances kept there.

House, Senate Action

The West Virginia Senate unanimously passed the measure Jan. 28, and it is currently in the House Health and Human Resources committee.

Safety flaws at the chemical storage site owned by Freedom Industries went largely undetected, the WVDEP has said, because the facility didn't manufacture chemicals, produce emissions or store substances underground; therefore, it wasn't subject to environmental regulations.

Tomblin said his measure aims to address state regulation shortcomings that allowed at least 7,500 gallons of MCHM to leak into the Elk River upstream from a water treatment plant serving Charleston and nine surrounding counties, prompting a state of emergency (8 DEN A-13, 1/13/14).

On Jan. 25, Tomblin ordered Freedom Industries Inc., the company responsible for the spill, to break down and remove all above-ground storage tanks, pipelines and machinery at its Etowah River Terminal.

Freedom Industries Inc. must dismantle the equipment and remove all chemicals from the site by March 15.