To: Dougherty, Emily[Dougherty.Emily@epa.gov]; Strauss, Linda[Strauss.Linda@epa.gov]; Jones, Jim[Jones.Jim@epa.gov]; Wise, Louise[Wise.Louise@epa.gov]; Jordan, William[Jordan.William@epa.gov]; Ellenberger, Jay[Ellenberger.Jay@epa.gov]; Bradbury, Steven[Bradbury.Steven@epa.gov]
From: Gillis, Chris
Sent: Fri 1/10/2014 11:34:23 PM
Subject: Fw: WSJ UPDATE: U.S. Opens Probe of West Virginia Chemical Spill

Here is article just sent to me with chemical name
Sent from BlackBerry

From: Davis, Alison
Sent: Friday, January 10, 2014 6:23:48 PM
To: Gillis, Chris
Subject: FW: WSJ UPDATE: U.S. Opens Probe of West Virginia Chemical Spill

WSJ story – let me know if you want more.

My contact info here:

Alison Davis

US EPA Office of Media Relations

Telephone number until Jan. 17: 202-564-0835

Mobile: 919-624-0872

From: Jones, Enesta
Sent: Friday, January 10, 2014 2:43 PM
To: Johnson, Alisha; Behringer, Caroline; Davis, Alison; Hull, George; Jones, Enesta
Subject: WSJ UPDATE: U.S. Opens Probe of West Virginia Chemical Spill

U.S. Opens Probe of West Virginia

Chemical Spill

Public Schools, Businesses Across Several Counties Closed as Residents Told Not to Use Water

By

Kris Maher

Federal authorities launched investigations Friday into a West Virginia chemical spill that contaminated the water supply for as many as 300,000 people and closed businesses and schools in the populous heart of the state.

U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin, whose jurisdiction overlaps the affected area, said his office has opened a criminal probe into the cause of Thursday's spill in the state capital of Charleston. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration is also investigating, as are state agencies, including the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection.

Thousands of homes and businesses in Charleston and surrounding counties were told not to drink or use their tap water on Thursday after officials determined that a leak from a chemical-manufacturer storage facility on the Elk River had infiltrated a water-treatment plant. President Barack Obama issued a federal disaster declaration for the state Friday, and officials scrambled to set up water-distribution centers.

U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin said thousands of miles of water pipes will have to be cleaned out and it could take several days to return the system to normal.

The president of West Virginia American Water, the company whose distribution system was affected, said he had no timeline for determining when the water would be safe to use.

"We don't know that the water is not safe, but we can't say that it is safe," Jeff McIntyre said at a news conference Friday morning. The company was flushing its distribution system and trying to find a standard to determine safety.

The spill of 4-methylcyclohexane methanol, which is used at preparation plants to wash coal, occurred Thursday at Freedom Industries Inc., a chemical company about a mile upriver on the Elk River from the water facility.

Jennifer Sayre, Kanawha county manager, said a few people went to hospitals complaining of symptoms such as vomiting, burning sensations and irritation, but none has been linked to the spill.

Tom Aluise, a spokesman for the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, said the chemical spilled from a 40,000-gallon storage tank and breached a containment wall before flowing into the river. He said the agency believes no more than 5,000 gallons had spilled. It was unclear how much might have entered the river.

He said the agency would investigate the cause of the spill and Freedom Industries' response, including

when it reported the incident to authorities. He said agency inspectors looking into the complaints from local residents Thursday first noticed the spill.

"We're still very early in the investigation," Mr. Aluise said.

Freedom Industries said it was working with federal and state agencies, including the Coast Guard, Army Corps of Engineers and Homeland Security to take all steps necessary to fix the issue.

"Since the discovery of the leak, safety for residents in Kanawha and surrounding counties has been Freedom Industries' first priority," said company President Gary Southern. He said the company was still working Friday to determine how much of the chemical had been released.

Mr. McIntyre said the water company first became aware of a problem at about noon Thursday and realized the chemical had entered the distribution system at about 4 p.m. after detecting the substance's distinctive odor, described as smelling like licorice or coconut oil. Mr. McIntyre said the company was unfamiliar with the chemical and still gathering information on its potential toxicity.

The commercial solvent is a straw-colored, greasy liquid commonly used as a solvent for lacquers, resins, oils and waxes; an antioxidant for lubricants; and a blending agent for special textile soaps and detergents, according to federal occupational-health documents.

Its vapors irritate eyes and, spilled on the skin, can cause rashes, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It doesn't easily dissolve in water and typically floats as an oily film.

In the immediate aftermath of the leak, there was no information available publicly about the levels of exposure people might encounter by breathing its vapors or drinking contaminated water.

Generally, though, several studies show that brief exposure to low levels of the chemical appears relatively harmless. Prolonged contact can cause breathing problems and trigger headaches, according to the Handbook of Toxic and Hazardous Chemical Carcinogens. Laboratory experiments with animals suggest that, when injected, high levels can damage the heart, liver and kidneys.

The water ban caused numerous disruptions to local businesses and schools. The West Virginia Department of Education reported that public schools across several counties were closed Friday. West Virginia State University was also shut but serving as an emergency water-distribution center.

Kizmet Chandler Rogers, a member of St. Marks Episcopal Church who was coordinating water-distribution efforts there, said more than 250 people had picked up water by Friday morning. "Everyone is just kind of waiting," she said, adding that people have a "sense of relief" when they find water at the church. "They're more concerned about how long this is going to take, and if we have enough water to…sustain them if it's a long period of time."

Charleston Mayor Danny Jones said he was disappointed that water-company officials couldn't estimate when residents and businesses could begin safely using water.

"This is devastating to everyday commerce," he said. "The folks out there would like an end to this. We would like a resolution soon."

—Robert Lee Hotz, Rebecca Balhaus and Gerald F. Seib contributed to this article.

Write to Kris Maher at kris.maher@wsj.com