

West Virginia residents speak out on chemical disaster

By Clement Daly and Samuel Davidson
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While water service is slowly being restored to residents in nine West Virginia counties following last Thursday's chemical spill outside the capitol city of Charleston, major hardships remain for the more than 300,000 people who have been affected.

As of Friday, West Virginia American Water, which provides water for residents in the area around Charleston, was reporting that the water was safe to drink and use for bathing and cleaning everywhere except for communities to the north and east of the city. But even in areas where the water has been declared safe, residents have reported that it continues to be discolored and odorous.

On Wednesday night, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department issued statements warning that pregnant women should continue to drink bottled water even in areas where tap water has been declared safe until no detectable levels of crude 4-Methylcyclohexanemethanol (MCHM), the chemical released by the spill, can be found.

For many, the water ban has meant not only a loss of pay—with many businesses in affected areas closed—but also additional expenses for basic necessities.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited several neighborhoods still affected by the water ban on Wednesday to speak with residents. Those interviewed described the hardships caused by the spill, all but ignored by the media, that have affected the elderly, the poor and working parents with children whose school districts were closed.

Glenda Mace, a mother of two children, ages 5 and 6, told the WSWWS while waiting for a bus that, because she does not own a car, she can get bottled water only when her parents are able to drive her to a distribution center. "We get only two cases of water per family.

That's enough to drink, but not enough to wash or do laundry," she said.

One of Glenda's sons has a medical condition that requires him to wear diapers. The water ban means she has to rely on baby wipes to keep him clean. "You can imagine how many wipes I have to use," she said. "And I have to buy them. Nobody is giving out wipes or anything else to help."

While state of emergency declarations have been signed at both the state and federal level, nominally making resources available for disaster relief, little aid outside of the delivery of bottled water has been forthcoming. Last Friday, West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin issued a "call to action drive" for residents to donate "water, sanitizer, wipes, liquid baby formula, paper plates, plastic utensils, and microwavable meals."

"The spill has been killing us," restaurant cook Jerry Mitchell said. "I have two little girls and it is costing us a fortune. We can only buy microwavable food. We can't use our pots and pans since we can't clean them. I have to take my daughters to their grandmother's house in Boone County just to have a bath. And that's at least a 40-mile drive one way. I've probably spent \$500 just in extra food and gas."

On top of this, Mitchell said that the Bob Evans restaurant where he has worked for the last 25 years was closed due to the water ban. "I am missing work... and I don't know if I am going to be given back pay. So far, I have missed \$400 in pay and I don't know when I will get back to work."

Nearly every resident with whom the WSWWS spoke expressed concerns over the long-term health effects of exposure to the chemical. Jerry has been particularly concerned about his granddaughter, Brooklyn, who has leukemia. "What is this doing to her? Nobody can tell

me,” he said. “I don’t trust them when they say that the water is going to be safe.”

Information on the health risks of the released chemical, MCHM, is largely nonexistent. At the time of the spill, little was known about the chemical and no safe exposure levels had been established. The federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a safety threshold of 1 part per million, essentially an educated guess, after extrapolating data from tests conducted on lab rats, a method some scientists believe is flawed.

Resident Paula Moore said she was concerned about the lack of knowledge of the chemical that was dumped into the river. “They have never done any extensive research on the chemical or what effect towards people and animals,” she said, “and what kind of damage it can cause to us. What will this do to pregnant women?”

“What kind of birth defects could this have caused? They don’t know because they have never done research on this chemical.”

Moore denounced the lack of government oversight that led to the spill. “They didn’t inspect the tanks that these chemicals were stored in since 1991. Why not? I thought that is what the DEP (West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection) is all about. That is what they are supposed to be keeping up with. They were not doing their jobs, and somebody in DEP needs to be held responsible too.”

She added, “Freedom Industries made \$26 million in profit and they can’t keep those tanks up to date!”

Paula’s friend, Lucky Green, a framer, added, “The government doesn’t care about the working people, we’re nothing to them. We feel the effect that this causes, but they don’t care about the working class. We feel it, we are struggling just to make it.

“They should never have had the tanks so close to the water and so close to the water intake. But the companies don’t care about us, just about making money.”

There was little sign of state or federal involvement in the relief effort at the locations visited by the WSWS. West Virginia Governor Tomblin has asked residents to “check on their friends, families and neighbors,” but there has been no systematic effort on the part of the authorities in the affected counties to check on the elderly and disabled.

Jessica Fidler, a flight medic who works in the town of Ripley, West Virginia, was volunteering with her

husband at the water distribution center established by the Belle, West Virginia Fire Department. She said that while the government had provided bottled water, they hadn’t seen or heard much from federal or state emergency officials. The relief effort had been organized almost exclusively at the local level.

“There has been a huge outpouring from people in the area,” Fidler explained. “Some people have come by just to drop off food for all the volunteers or offer money for anything we might need.”

When asked how she was coping with the water ban, Jessica said she had been showering and washing the family’s laundry in Ripley, 40 miles north of Charleston, when she could. She said that when that wasn’t possible, she and her husband had been taking quick showers at home in the tainted water and keeping their children clean as best they could with bottled water.

The WSWS spoke to Naomi Moore as she picked up supplies at the Belle distribution site with her 6-year-old granddaughter, Brooklyn. “I feel sorry for the people who don’t have someone they can go to for water,” she said. “I have been taking water to the elderly who do not have a car to get here on their own.”

She added, “If it wasn’t for my son who lives in Mason County, things would really be bad. We go down there to wash our clothes and take a bath.”

Moore expressed frustration at the failure of government regulators to keep the companies in check. “The tanks need to be checked,” she said. “They are made of metal, and metal rusts. We have regulations, but the government does not enforce them.”

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