

WV Officials Dispute Formaldehyde Claim

JONATHAN MATTISE, Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — State officials and a water company strongly disputed a scientist's claim Wednesday that residents were likely breathing in traces of formaldehyde while showering after the chemical spill, saying the chemical that tainted the water supply only produces the carcinogen at extremely high temperatures.

The crude MCHM that spilled into the water supply on Jan. 9 ultimately can break down into formaldehyde, West Virginia Environmental Quality Board vice-chairman Scott Simonton told a state legislative panel Wednesday. Simonton, who is also an environmental scientist at Marshall University, said the formaldehyde showed up in three water samples at a downtown Charleston restaurant as part of testing funded by a law firm representing businesses that lost money during the spill.

State Bureau for Public Health Commissioner Dr. Letitia Tierney — the state's top health officer — called Simonton's presentation "totally unfounded."

She said Simonton isn't a part of the interagency team that has been testing water samples. Tierney said her agency is unaware of how Simonton's study was done, including sampling procedures, protocol and methodology.

"His opinion is personal but speaks in no official capacity," Tierney said.

Simonton, who holds a Ph.D. in engineering, was appointed by the governor to the board that hears appeals on state water permitting and enforcement decisions. He was first appointed more than a decade ago by then-Gov. Bob Wise for his first five-year term.

Tierney said experts who have been assisting the state said the only way for formaldehyde to come from MCHM is if it were combusted at 500 degrees Fahrenheit.

West Virginia American Water called Simonton's opinion "misleading and irresponsible."

University of Washington public health dean Dr. Howard Frumkin, an environmental health specialist, suggested that officials use caution when interpreting the results of the water tests that Simonton cited, including asking whether the chemical was present before the spill.

"There's lot of possibilities there," he said, including the chance that formaldehyde showing up in tests isn't a result of the chemical spill.

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The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the chemical can make people who breathe a lot of it feel sick, and it appears to increase cancer risks if inhaled repeatedly.

Initial testing at Vandalia Grille in Charleston showed traces of the chemical in the water -- twice at 32 parts per billion and once at 33 parts per billion, Simonton said. Other testing showed no traces of formaldehyde, but samples are still being processed. The testing is funded by Charleston law firm Thompson Barney LLC.

"I can guarantee that citizens in this valley are, at least in some instances, breathing formaldehyde," said Simonton.

He said he believes crude MCHM is breaking down into formaldehyde in showers or the water system.

Freedom Industries' spill in Charleston spurred a water-use ban for 300,000 West Virginians, but officials have lifted it.

State officials believe the leak of crude MCHM and stripped PPH started Jan. 9. Freedom Industries has estimated 10,000 gallons of chemicals leaked from its tank.

According to the CDC, formaldehyde is a known carcinogen. It is colorless, strong-smelling gas used to make building materials and household products, including walls, cabinets, and furniture.

Breathing formaldehyde in large quantities can cause sore throats, coughing, itchy eyes and nosebleeds. Symptoms also are common with other upper respiratory illnesses, such as colds, the flu and seasonal allergies. People with short-term exposure are less likely to have symptoms.

According to the CDC, the risk of health problems is low when formaldehyde levels are of 10 parts per billion. The risk is "medium" at 100 parts per billion, particularly among the elderly, young children and for those with health conditions such as asthma.

Studies showed that people repeatedly exposed to airborne formaldehyde in the workplace produced more cases of nose and throat cancer than expected, according to the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry.

A spokeswoman for Freedom Industries did not immediately return a phone call for comment.

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