Controversy Continues Over WV Water Safety

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — A federal health official says it's safe to use water contaminated by a chemical spill in West Virginia last month.

It's hardly the first time the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told 300,000 affected West Virginians to drink, cook with or otherwise use their tap water. The agency has just avoided calling the water "safe."

Spokeswoman Barbara Reynolds said Monday the agency wanted to recognize the desire of people to use the "less scientific" term when discussing chemical levels in the water. She said the word choice doesn't change her agency's guidance.

"While a toxicologist does not speak precisely in terms of safe or not safe — saying 'safe' here is a less scientific way of restating our belief about how the water can be used, which we shared Feb. 5," Reynolds wrote in an email Monday to The Associated Press and other reporters.

The Jan. 9 spill in Charleston tainted 300,000 people's water, rendering it unsafe for anything except flushing toilets and fighting fires for up to 10 days. Though the water-use ban has been lifted for more than a month, many residents still stick to bottled water.

On Feb. 5, a CDC official traveled to Charleston to give a broad endorsement of the water, saying everyone, pregnant women included, could use it. Up to that point, pregnant women had received conflicting guidance.

Days after many people were told to drink the water, CDC advised pregnant women to consider a different water source on Jan. 15. The CDC has since said everyone could have used the water when the water-use ban was lifted. The guidance was only meant to empower women to make health choices, agency officials said.

Crude MCHM, the first chemical discovered in the spill, and stripped PPH, are used to clean coal. Little is known about their toxicity, in the short or long term. Neither is considered hazardous by federal environmental standards. Only a handful of studies exist for crude MCHM, and they were conducted on lab animals.

At a Feb. 10 congressional hearing in Charleston, W.Va. health officer Dr. Letitia Tierney said she was confident in the federal standard for chemical levels in drinking water. But she also said everyone has a different idea of what is safe. For instance, she said West Virginians can choose to base jump more than 800 feet off a bridge once a year, a tradition called Bridge Day.

U.S. Rep. Bill Shuster, the Pennsylvania Republican chairman of the committee that

held the hearing, said officials probably were walking a fine legal line by not saying the word "safe."

"I suspect the main reason is everyone is afraid they're going to get sued," Shuster said.

West Virginia's health agency, however, says the CDC's new use of "safe" doesn't change the state's message.

"It is consistent with what we have said throughout this crisis," said Allison Adler, spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Human Resources. "We are pleased that the CDC has taken this step to clarify its position."

Still, state officials want to know more about the benchmark that the CDC quickly determined after the spill.

Two weeks ago, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin ordered a panel of experts to evaluate the CDC's standard. The research is part of a $762,000 project to test water in 10 people's homes and study the chemical's odor threshold.

Tomblin last week urged the CDC to start conducting more lab animal tests to get more information about the chemicals' toxicity.

"We believe you will agree there is a pressing need to assist the people of the State of West Virginia through further study of potential health effects resulting from exposure to water contaminated with crude MCHM and PPH," Tomblin wrote to the CDC.

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