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Elk River report outlines other water safety threats

by **Dave Boucher**
Daily Mail Capitol Bureau Chief

CHARLESTON, W.Va. - While Freedom Industries' tank farm will soon be gone, there are still 62 other potential sources of contamination sitting upstream of the West Virginia American Water Co. treatment plant, according to a new report released Monday.

Meanwhile, a separate poll released by the Sierra Club found West Virginians are nervous sites like these could again prove faulty and taint the water supply.

The West Virginia Rivers Coalition and independent consultant Downstream Strategies compiled the report about potential contaminants along the Elk River. It indicates there are more threats than listed in previous state-issued reports, and also includes more detailed information about those sites.

"This report is a next step in understanding all of the threats to our water and what needs to be done to make sure

we are better protected from the wide range of potential hazards," Angie Rossier, leader of the West Virginia Rivers Coalition, said in a news release.

A 2002 Source Water Assessment Report issued by the state Bureau for Public Health found 51 sources of potential contamination in the "zone of critical concern" around the treatment plant.

The 51 sites, including Freedom Industries, led the bureau to list the plant at high susceptibility of contamination.

There was little detail about the sites though, and some conflicting information in the report as to the actual number of them, said Evan Hansen, president of Downstream Strategies.

After filing a Freedom of Information Act request with the bureau, Hansen said he received a list of 62 sources. That would indicate the state updated the list, but it's unclear what sources were added.

The map included in the state's report was also unclear.

"It's a mess," Hansen said.

After receiving the information, Downstream Strategies and the coalition created their own report on the sites. They include 10 car dealerships, seven gas stations, four auto-repair shops and a wide range of other sites.

Only one is listed as "aboveground storage tanks," the phrase used to describe the tanks at the Freedom site on the Elk River since the leak.

"That's good news," Hansen said. "But it also means that the aboveground storage tank act is addressing a small portion of the potential issues."

Hansen is referring to a bill in the state Legislature that attempts to address aboveground tank regulation.

While the proposal calls for regular inspections of aboveground tanks, an amendment made in the House of Delegates also calls for an inventory of any other potential contaminant to public water supplies, regardless of how it is stored.

Hansen said he hopes the new information and maps the two groups were able to create can help local communities

create a source water assessment plan.

Such plans would show potential contaminants, outline response procedures to a spill and require input from the community and officials.

That process will require much more information than this report, but Hansen said he hopes the new details are a first step in better preparing communities for an emergency.

West Virginians apparently still fear incidents like the Freedom Industries leak and subsequent water crisis can still happen, according to a poll released Monday by the Sierra Club.

The survey polled more than 500 registered voters from across the state between Feb. 7 and Feb. 9. A representative from the Sierra Club declined to provide the Daily Mail a copy of the full poll or questions asked during the poll.

Almost 90 percent of those polled expressed some level of concern about the spill, according to a memo detailing the results.

The memo said 69 percent of West Virginians think another spill could happen unless officials take preventative actions.

The spill should be a "wake-up call" for the state to start paying more attention to air and water issues in West Virginia, according of 73 percent of those polled.

"After years of outrageous industry rhetoric, it's crystal clear. In West Virginia, we want clean water and air," said Jim Sconyers, chairman of the West Virginia Sierra Club, in a news release. "These poll results show once and for all that regulation is not a dirty word here."

Almost 60 percent of those polled said the coal industry bears little or no responsibility for the spill. However, 61 percent said the coal industry and industry lobbyists have too much power to "prevent common-sense protections and regulations."

There are political ramifications as well, the group said. The poll found 62 percent of those polled would favor a candidate who supports stronger environmental protection regulations. In comparison, 30 percent would support a

candidate who believes more regulations hurt job creation and the economy.

The memo detailing the poll said voters across the political spectrum agree strong regulation and enforcement could have prevented the spill, with 79 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of independents and 57 percent of Republicans agreeing with that statement.

The House Judiciary Committee is still considering the aboveground storage tank bill. The House Finance Committee must also approve of the bill before it goes to the full House for a vote.

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