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Residents remain skeptical of tap water after spill

by **Marcus Constantino**
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CHARLESTON, WV -- As the detectable levels of crude MCHM in Kanawha Valley tap water go down, residents' skepticism and concern remain high a month after the Jan. 9 chemical spill along the Elk River in Charleston that tainted the water supply to 300,000 West Virginians served by West Virginia American Water's Charleston treatment plant.

Morgantown-based environmental consulting firm Downstream Strategies is giving businesses and residents extra peace of mind by offering sampling for crude MCHM in residential and commercial tap water. Samples are collected from clients' tap water and sent to independent labs, where they are tested for crude MCHM, formaldehyde and other chemicals known to have leaked into the Elk River.

Marc Glass, principal of soil and water remediation at Downstream Strategies, said tests from clients' tap water reveal levels of the contaminant are steadily declining as the water-soluble chemical dissolves into the water.

"Initially, we were kind of responding to a demand," Glass said. "We received multiple phone and email requests if there were ways to test for the chemical. The water company had been testing hydrants and publicly accessible places, but not from taps."

Glass said few laboratories were able to test for the chemical at first because it was never meant to be in drinking water and no testing protocol existed before the Jan. 9 spill. He said laboratories are still in the process of finding

more sensitive methods for detecting MCHM, and ways of finding the presence of PPH and its byproducts.

"We talk to labs almost daily," Glass said. "There's talk that other laboratories are working on offering even lower detection levels. As they start to offer lower detection levels, we'll be able to offer those."

Glass said the laboratories he is using for water sampling are testing the water using a slightly different method than what the West Virginia National Guard is using.

"The extraction method concentrates a large volume one liter sample down to a smaller volume, which concentrates the sample before it's analyzed," Glass said. "That allows us to get the lower detection limits. There's a concerted effort to try to lower the minimum detection limits and we will offer those as the laboratories indicate they're able to provide that service."

Glass said while the labs are capable of using either method, they're confident this method "is better representative" of the actual amount of MCHM in the samples.

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