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Tap water sampling finds MCHM in some homes

By [Ken Ward Jr.](#)

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A Morgantown-based consulting group has found the main ingredient in Crude MCHM in 40 percent of a small sampling of homes it has tested, lawmakers were told Friday.

Downstream Strategies sent legislative leaders a summary of the results of their testing of private home water supplies.

In a letter, Evan Hansen and Marc Glass of the firm said they found 4-MCHM in four of 10 samples taken from home cold-water taps between Jan. 18 and 27.

The concentrations ranged from 0.011 parts per million to 0.13 parts per million, with a detection limit of about 0.01 parts per million, according to their letter to Senate President Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, and House Speaker Tim Miley, D-Harrison.

The other six samples did not detect any 4-MCHM. Downstream Strategies said their laboratory reporting limits for the non-detects ranged from 10 parts per billion to 110 parts per billion, with most at or about 10 parts per billion. The reporting limit is the concentration at which there is a high degree of confidence the reported number is accurate.

Downstream Strategies said that when testing homes its staff "purged" the system by running the cold water tap several minutes until the temperature stabilized, so they were sure they were testing fresh water from West Virginia American Water.

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"Because we used this protocol, we have limited potential from intentional or unintentional storage within private plumbing system components (including, for example, hot water tanks)," the firm said in its letter to lawmakers. "Our results report water quality as delivered to homes from the WVAW distribution system. Additional samples would need to be collected to measure water quality from hot water tanks or other private plumbing system components."

Jennifer Weidhaas, an environmental engineer at West Virginia University, also said this week all 18 samples she's taken from home water taps came back below the 1-part-per-million level the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said is acceptable to use.

Weidhaas declined to say what levels her testing found, though she said at two houses her team saw increases in chemical levels immediately after flushing of the home plumbing systems.

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State and federal officials have said residents can resume using water from West Virginia American Water's regional system, citing test results showing that levels of Crude MCHM were below a controversial 1 part-per-million "screening level" set by the CDC.

But government officials have done no testing inside people's homes, and tests at area schools have been only of chemical levels in the water -- not of levels in the air, despite complaints about inhalation impacts and a lack of data on the inhalation toxicity of the material.

Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's office has said the governor instructed state teams to come up with a plan for testing samples from homes across the region to address concerns from citizens and scientists that Crude MCHM could have been absorbed by home plumbing systems, where it could continue to leach into water -- even if in very small amounts -- for some undetermined amount of time.

At the same time, it's not clear what -- if any -- long-term testing beyond West Virginia American's water plant intake and output will continue. And Ben Gilmer, a project manager from Downstream Strategies, questioned whether officials are taking adequate samples across the distribution system.

"It appears water sampling has basically stopped beyond the water intake facility and public schools," Gilmer said. "Though a detailed explanation of their sampling methodology has yet to be provided, it appears that authorities are no longer retesting sampling locations after they reach a no-detection level. However, based on our review of the sampling data, there were multiple samples that previously had detectable MCHM levels, yet not all of these specific locations have been retested. Therefore, we have no way of knowing if they truly reached a no-detection level."

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Gilmer said the state has refused to release more-detailed geographic information about the locations they have tested, saying those data belong to the water company.

"One of the most basic and fundamental steps that state authorities could take to regain public trust would be to show on a map where they have sampled each day, along with sample results," Gilmer said.

With those data, Gilmer said, citizens could see for themselves how water quality is improving over time across the region and be confident the state's sampling approach is sufficient.

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