

U.S.

# A Second Chemical Was Part of West Virginia Chemical Spill, Company Reveals

By JOHN SCHWARTZ JAN. 22, 2014

The chemical spill that left 300,000 West Virginia residents without usable water involved more chemicals than the company responsible had previously reported, officials revealed this week, leading the state's Department of Environmental Protection to order that company to give a full accounting of the chemicals that had leaked into the Elk River.

The newly disclosed chemical appears to be somewhat less toxic than MCHM, the chemical initially identified, and it made up only a small part of the Jan. 9 spill. But the late disclosure outraged officials and citizens who had been hungry for reliable information.

"It is very disturbing that we are just now finding out about this new chemical, almost two weeks after the leak," said West Virginia's secretary of state, Natalie E. Tennant, in a statement on Wednesday. She called for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to post its water test results online. "We must have confidence that the water coming out of our faucets is not going to make our families sick."

The owner of the storage tank where the leak occurred, Freedom Industries, initially said it had released crude MCHM — or 4-methylcyclohexane methanol, a toxic blend of coal cleaners — in the spill. But on Tuesday, the company revealed that the tank, which leaked about 7,500 gallons into the ground by the Elk River, had also contained a mixture of glycol ethers known as PPH, with a similar function as MCHM.

In response to the state's order, the company stated Wednesday that PPH had made up 7.3 percent of the fluid, and "our records and internal investigation indicate that there were no other materials" in the tank at the time of the spill.

According to an account in The Charleston Gazette, the president of Freedom Industries, Gary Southern, disclosed the presence of the PPH in a meeting on Tuesday with H. Michael Dorsey, the director of homeland security and emergency response for the state Environmental Protection Department.

The two men were about to enter a scheduled meeting with state agencies to talk about the spill when Mr. Southern asked to speak privately and gave him the news. "He said, 'I'm going to have a terrible day today,'" Mr. Dorsey told the newspaper.

An employee of Freedom Industries, reached by telephone, said the company had no comment.

The Centers for Disease Control issued a statement on Wednesday stating that information on the toxic properties of PPH "is limited," but the lower apparent toxicity and smaller amount of the chemical "does not suggest any new health concerns associated with the release of PPH."

Residents downstream from the spill have dealt with days of uncertainty and distrust over the leak and the information about it, said Andrew J. Whelton, an assistant professor of environmental engineering at the University of South Alabama. "People are driving 60 miles away to take a shower," he said.

He and colleagues drove to West Virginia to test the drinking water and to talk to residents about their experiences with the spill. The procedure for flushing water systems can expose people to the chemicals if care is not taken, he said; he has proposed and published an alternative flushing procedure online.

Marc Glass, an environmental consultant with the firm Downstream Strategies in Morgantown, said he was "stupefied" to hear about chemical contamination from news reports before the company had fully informed

the public and government sources. “This is Spill Response 101,” he said.

Mr. Glass said that the spill could have involved chemicals with much greater toxicity, and so “this isn’t the worst thing that could be out in the environment.” Still, he said, “This is just a really good opportunity to take a serious look at what we’re doing.”

At a candlelight vigil on Tuesday night at the State Capitol, Cindy Harrah-Cox, whose adult daughter was hospitalized from drinking the water before the contamination was revealed, said, “I’m a mad mama” about the news of previously undisclosed chemicals in the mix. Ms. Harrah-Cox, whose husband is a retired coal miner, said, “I am thankful that my husband had a job for 32 years, one that could pay our bills and feed our family.” But, she added, “At what cost? Dying young? The air and water is killing us? Is it worth all that?”

Daniel Heyman contributed reporting from Charleston, W.Va.

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