


CLIMATEPROGRESS**Six Months After Massive West Virginia Chemical Spill,
Residents Still Wary Of Water**

BY **KILEY KROH**  JULY 11, 2014 AT 12:09 PM UPDATED: JULY 11, 2014 AT 1:31 PM



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Six months ago 300,000 West Virginians were shocked to learn a chemical used in the coal production process, crude MCHM, had leaked into the Elk River and contaminated their water supply. They were ordered not to use the water for anything — bathing, cooking, drinking — only flushing their toilets.

Even after the water ban was lifted, their concerns were not alleviated, as people continued to flood area hospitals and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advised pregnant women and small children to avoid drinking the water.

Six months have passed since that frightening January day but the spill and the events that followed have left a lasting imprint on the community. Chemical incidents are nothing new to Pam Curry, who has lived in the so-called Chemical Valley area her entire life, but she says this one was different. A spill of this size, in the state capital, simply couldn't be brushed under the rug.

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In the wake of the spill, "there was a pall that set in here is how I can describe it," Curry said. "We didn't have the sense that everything was under control and we were being protected." Several months later, she describes a feeling of "general apprehension and frustration" regarding the official response to the spill and communication with the public.

"There's still concern about the spill," Curry said. "A lot of the concern is not knowing enough about that chemical to know what kind of immediate or long-term damage might have happened because of it. It's an industrial solvent that hasn't been tested on humans."

Those concerns are fueled by revelations like new research released Thursday that found crude MCHM to be much more toxic to aquatic life than was reported by Eastman Chemical, the company that makes it. "What is important is that the findings further demonstrate that additional work is needed to better understand the short- and long-term toxicity implications of this contaminated water," environmental engineer Andrew Whelton told ThinkProgress.

Curry is able to use well water in her home but said most people she talks to still aren't drinking tap water. "If you look at shelves of water in grocery stores, they're almost always empty," she said. Curry's 81-year-old mother is in poor health and continues to pay for bottled water delivery since the spill, avoiding the tap water at all costs.

Charleston resident Cullen Naumoff also said she didn't use any water — for drinking, cooking or bathing — until after Memorial Day, but notes that a previous medical condition prompted her to be more cautious than many West Virginians. While Naumoff doesn't think anyone among the people she associates with regularly feels comfortable drinking water straight from the tap, she acknowledges that there is

“definitely a segment of the population that has moved on and moved on very early. It’s a tension we experience in the state.”

Both Curry and Naumoff attribute the lingering fears to the mixed messages residents received from state and federal officials regarding the safety of the water and response plans. And neither feel that has improved in the past six months. “It’s still been poor,” said Naumoff, regarding the official response to the spill. “There still hasn’t been regular communication afterward in a way that’s accessible to every member of the community.”

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West Virginians point out that one benefit of the spill’s timing was that the state legislature happened to be in session and because the impacts were still being acutely felt, it helped push spill response legislation, S.B. 373, across the finish line before the end of the session.

But the fight isn’t over yet, cautions Evan Hansen, principal with the environmental consulting firm Downstream Strategies, based in Morgantown, West Virginia. For instance, a rule-making process is currently underway at state’s Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regarding future regulation of above-ground storage tanks like the ones owned by Freedom Industries. According to Hansen, the most contentious issue is whether certain categories can be excluded — coal, oil and gas, the farm bureau, and several other industries all want their tanks exempted from the rule.

Hansen has been critical of the prevailing culture at the DEP and the impact that has had on how various industries are regulated (or aren’t). As for the impact of the spill, “I think it’s too early to tell whether there’s been a cultural shift,” he said. “The first indication will be when the DEP publishes its emergency rule for above-ground storage tanks. But when we’ll really know for sure is at the next legislative session. The legislature will have to approve the DEP rule, and I wouldn’t be surprised if industries impacted by the new rule lobby to change the law itself.”

Hansen notes that there are several processes currently underway to evaluate the response, determine liability, and study the long-term impacts of the spill on both the environment and the people of the Charleston area. “It’s really important for the public to stay engaged in it because the real question of whether there’s an effective response is going to be answered in the next legislative session,” he said. “It simply takes a long

time to create a new regulatory system from scratch; it's just not going to be in place until after the next session. Industries regulated under the new rule will have opportunities to undermine it by changing the law itself during the next session."

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Naumoff, who works in economic development, thinks the ripple effects of the spill will be felt for some time. "West Virginia faces a perception problem anyways and I don't think this water crisis helped the situation or helped changed that perception," she said.

As for Curry, she finds herself in a new role. "It's gotten a lot of us seeing ourselves as environmental activists. I've never thought of myself that way," she said. She hopes the increased awareness can help change the prevailing mindset in a state that has been plagued by pollution and poverty for decades. "It is a turning point," Curry said. "You have some portion of 300,000 people very much aware of the environmental impact on their community and themselves in a way they never would have been."

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