

Bottled Water for Pearce Creek Residents as Feds Cite Health Risks; High Manganese Known for Years but Action Delayed

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A CECIL TIMES SPECIAL REPORT

Residents of three Earleville communities, who have been fighting for decades to get state and federal agencies to resolve well water pollution caused by a federal dredge spoil dumpsite, will now get free bottled water after the federal Centers for Disease Control recently raised alarm bells about high manganese levels even in homes with water treatment systems. Elevated levels of manganese in drinking water have been shown in a Canadian study to lower children's IQ and brain function while neurological damage similar to Parkinson's disease has been found in older adults.

A community meeting was hastily scheduled for Saturday 5/28/16, at 10 a.m. at Bohemia Manor High School, on Route 213 in Chesapeake City. Attending will be representatives of the CDC, Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), the Cecil County Health Department, and the US Army Corps of Engineers, which owns the Pearce Creek dumpsite located at the end of Pond Neck Road. Bottled water is expected to be available at the meeting for residents of the West View Shores, Sunset Pointe, and Bayview Estates communities whose wells have been polluted by the dump.

There are still many unanswered questions, such as why it took so long for action to be taken when it was known to local health officials since 2013 that well tests found levels of manganese above federal guidelines. Why were residents' requests for bottled water rejected, after a January, 2013 US Geological Survey report confirmed the dumpsite had polluted local wells and aquifers, and instead told their water was safe to drink?

And why did it take so long for the CDC and its Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry—which received the well water test results in August, 2014—to evaluate the data? CDC only notified MDE of its “concerns” about two weeks ago, according to MDE officials.

The first local notice of the latest in a long line of well water problems came in an email to the Cecil County Executive and some members of the County Council that was sent last Friday 5/20/16 by Jeff Fretwell, of MDE, in which he said that a community meeting had been scheduled to provide “information regarding well water quality, specifically manganese levels.” The email did not disclose health risks but noted the CDC had recently provided its “analysis” without stating what that analysis concluded. The email went on to say the public meeting would “include a discussion of the well water quality and plans to provide bottled water to the residents.”

Even that minimal information to the county government was more than that shared with the residents. A one-page written notice was sent via snailmail that arrived in most local mailboxes on Monday and an email notification was due to be distributed today (Wednesday) just a few days before the meeting. The notice said nothing about health risks or manganese levels or a review by the CDC and did not specify there was a plan to provide bottled water— points that would have drawn concerns. Scheduling the meeting, on such short notice, for the Memorial Day holiday weekend, when many residents are traveling or have longstanding plans, could limit the number of people who show up for the meeting.

Cecil Times has learned that on Monday evening, representatives of MDE and the Maryland Port Administration (MPA) met with several civic association leaders of the communities to tell them of a plan to provide bottled water on an interim basis until a pipeline from the Town of Cecilton is built to bring clean town water to the area and permanently close the private wells. (MDE made construction of the pipeline a condition of a permit for the Corps to resume dumping of shipping channel dredge spoils at the Pearce Creek site—which was closed to further dumping over 20 years ago due to water quality concerns in the area. The \$14 million pipeline, which is being financed by the MPA, is currently under construction and completion of the water project is expected by 2018.)

Bill Haines, head of the Bayview Estates civic association, attended the meeting and told Cecil Times that high manganese levels were mentioned at the meeting. But most of the discussion centered on implementing the bottled water plan, which he said would include 1 gallon of water per person, per day, or 7 gallons of bottled water per person, per week.

In an email to Cecil Times, Jay Apperson, deputy director of communications for the MDE, said that the MPA will provide bottled water for two months, and then the US Army Corps will take over providing bottled water until the pipeline is completed.

Meanwhile, scientific studies and health agencies have reported for years that elevated levels of manganese in well water have been linked to neurological damage in children and adults. The federal EPA has set a maximum safe level of 300 micrograms per liter (0.3 milligrams) in well water, and the agency is considering imposition of new limits on manganese in public drinking water systems. Samples in the Earlville area exceeded the existing EPA standards in some, but not all, tested wells.

An influential Canadian study, reported in 2010, found “significant deficits in the intelligence quotient (IQ) of children exposed to higher concentration of manganese in drinking water. Yet, manganese concentrations were well below current guidelines.” The study took into consideration societal factors, such as income, family history and education, and concluded that the higher the manganese levels in drinking water, the lower the child’s IQ. (Science Daily reported on the Canadian study here: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/09/100920074013.htm#.V0Sb5aevhQc.email>]

The Wisconsin state Health Department cites other studies in warning residents that drinking of water with high levels of manganese can cause “harm to the nervous system” and long-term exposure can

produce “a disorder similar to Parkinson’s Disease” in older adults.

While such studies and warnings have been available for years—and Cecil Times readily found them in Internet searches—such concerns were never communicated by state or local officials to Earlville residents, even as high manganese levels were found in local wells.

Fred vonStaden, director of environmental health for the Cecil County Health Department, said in an interview with Cecil Times that he sent data on 2013 and 2014 well testing in the Earlville communities to the CDC in August, 2014 but heard nothing from the agency until about two weeks ago when the CDC notified MDE of its “concerns” about high manganese levels.

VonStaden said that some well tests found manganese levels above the 300 micrograms per liter EPA standard, in both “raw” untreated water but also in treated water from homes with water treatment systems. High manganese levels were found in over half of the samples taken from untreated water, he said, but 10 percent of treated water systems also registered high manganese levels above the federal standards.

He said he forwarded the well tests to the CDC to seek further “guidance” and had no idea why it took the federal agency so long to review the data and voice concerns with the manganese levels.

In an email to Cecil Times, Apperson of MDE said that there was no formal written report from the CDC. The agency’s “concerns” were expressed in a conference call with MDE and county health officials two weeks ago. Apperson added that a letter is currently being drafted by the CDC on the issue.

Cecil Times has also obtained a copy of a letter, sent Tuesday 5/24/16 from Pete K. Rahn, the state Secretary of Transportation who oversees the Maryland Port Administration, and Ben Grumbles, Secretary of the Environment, to the US Army Corps of Engineers, confirming the bottled water arrangements and to “express our concern with the water quality in wells near the Pearce Creek” dumpsite owned by the Corps. Bottled water is “the safest course of action,” the letter said, adding that “the public health of the Bay View Estates, West View Shores and Sunset Pointe residents must be our top priority.”

For decades, the Corp sought to avoid any responsibility or remedial action for the well water pollution in the area. It was only after the Corps—and the Maryland Port Administration—wanted to resume shipping channel dredge spoil dumping in the area that the agency even considered any action. And it has been the MPA that has borne the brunt of the costs for solving the long-term wellwater issue by paying for the Cecilton water pipeline. The Corps is only paying for a new liner on the dumpsite that was mandated by MDE as a condition for a water quality permit required before dumping could be resumed.

And it was MDE that made it a condition of the water quality permit that the Cecilton pipeline be built and ruled that no new dumping could take place until residents were hooked up to the new pipeline. An estimated 235 homes will be linked to the system.

After bailing out the Corps on much of the Pearce Creek problems, the state is now requiring the Corps to kick in some money to directly help the local residents whose water has been degraded for decades by the dump—even if it is a relatively paltry sum to provide bottled water for about a year and a half.

Meanwhile, several members of the County Council expressed frustration at a Tuesday morning worksession when Fretwell's email from MDE was read aloud, with its minimal information. Council President Robert Hodge (R-5) said the scheduling of the meeting on the holiday weekend was poorly-timed and wondered what was the point of "discussing" bottled water, since residents have been clamoring for bottled water for years.

Council Vice President Alan McCarthy (R-1), whose district includes Earleville and who has played an active role in discussions for years over how to resolve the wellwater issue, pulled out water testing reports and said it appeared that health department officials had known for some time that there were elevated levels of the substance.

On Wednesday, McCarthy spoke with MDE and county health officials and said he still had questions about the levels of risk and why it took so long to bring the information, even in a piece-meal fashion, to citizens or elected officials. "We're talking about people's lives here," he said.