

Officials Apologize for Delayed Response to Water Issues Near Earleville Dump, Bottled Water Given at Local Meeting; Some Wells Had 1,000 Times Max Manganese

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For over 20 years, Earleville residents living near a federal shipping channel dredge spoil dumpsite fought for recognition, accountability and an immediate solution for pollution of their drinking water wells. Finally, on Saturday 5/28/16, they got an apology, free bottled water, and the concerned attention of Gov. Larry Hogan's administration, represented by the Secretary of the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE).

But the polluters-in-chief—the US Army Corps of Engineers—were nowhere to be seen or heard at a hastily called community meeting at Bohemia Manor High School in Chesapeake City to discuss recently disclosed high levels of manganese in both untreated wellwater and water treated with home filtration systems. The high levels of manganese—which has been linked to neurological and brain damage in young children in multiple studies and neurological problems in older adults in some research—were recorded by the Cecil County health department in 2013 and 2014 well tests, and forwarded to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in mid-2014 for review. But the federal agency only responded, with alarm bells about the manganese levels in local well tests, a few weeks ago.

[SEE the exclusive CECIL TIMES SPECIAL REPORT, published last week on 5/25/16, here: <http://ceciltimes.com/2016/05/bottled-water-for-pearce-creek-area-residents-as-federal-agency-cites-health-risks-high-manganese-levels-known-for-years-but-action-delayed/>]

As a result of the CDC's concerns about the high levels of manganese, state officials mobilized a rapid response to include provision of free bottled water to residents of the West View Shores, Sunset Pointe, and Bayview Estates communities adjacent to the federal dumpsite located at the end of Pond Neck Road in Earleville. MDE will pay the costs for the first two months but thereafter, the US Army Corps of Engineers will be required to pay the costs, according to a letter obtained by Cecil Times from the state MDE and Department of Transportation to the federal Corps of Engineers.

The long-term solution is construction of a \$14 million pipeline from the town of Cecilton— already under construction and paid for by the Maryland Port Administration—to bring clean, safe town water (which has no elevated levels of manganese) to the affected communities by the spring of 2018.

The MPA is bearing the brunt of the costs because MDE mandated a local water solution before it would grant required state environmental permits to re-open the Pearce Creek dumpsite—which was closed to

further dumping of dredge spoils over 20 years ago due to MDE concerns about well water quality in the area. MPA says it need to re-open the Earleville dump for dredge spoil deposits in order to keep vital Chesapeake Bay shipping channels open to maritime commerce.

“This is something that probably we should have done a decade ago. But it takes political will,” Virginia (Ginny) Kearney, deputy director of MDE’s Water Management Administration, said about giving free bottled water to local residents until the pipeline project is operational.

MDE Secretary Ben Grumbles said the Earleville water problems were “very much on the radar screen” of the Hogan administration and that bottled water was the safest course of action to respond to the newly disclosed manganese problem. In an interview with Cecil Times, the Secretary said he had discussed the recently revealed manganese issue in local wells with Gov. Hogan and that the governor had directed him to attend the meeting to re-assure local residents of the administration’s commitment to help local residents and to report back to the governor on residents’ concerns. (Grumbles is a water quality expert, the former president of the non-profit environmental group US Water Alliance and former federal Assistant Administrator for Water of the federal Environmental Protection Agency.)

Karl Markiewicz, chief toxicologist with the Philadelphia office of the federal CDC’s Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, explained the health impacts of elevated levels of manganese in drinking water. The local situation is nothing like the Flint, Michigan water crisis, he said, because high lead levels, as found in Flint, are much more serious than the manganese found in Earleville.

But he acknowledged— under questioning by Cecil County Council Vice President Alan McCarthy (R-1), who represents Earleville and has been very involved in meetings on resolving the local water problems—that it shouldn’t have taken over a year and a half to get a CDC review of the well tests and a response to local concerns.

“I agree it doesn’t seem like it should take so long,” the CDC official said. “I apologize.” So far, the CDC has only communicated its concerns about the local wellwater manganese levels in conference phone calls with MDE and the local health department. A detailed report is expected later in the year.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has established “guidelines”—but not mandated maximum levels—of manganese in wellwater of 300 micrograms per liter (0.3 milligrams per liter) at which health concerns could be registered. A much lower level—50 micrograms per liter—has been set for “aesthetic” problems such as bitter water taste and brownish staining of sinks and water fixtures.

In an interview with Cecil Times, the CDC’s Markiewicz acknowledged that some of the wellwater tests in the Earleville area were “1,000 times” above the EPA guideline of 300 Micrograms per liter for possible health concerns. As previously reported by Cecil Times, those health concerns include lower IQ levels and brain function in young children, as disclosed by a Canadian study in 2010, and Wisconsin state health warnings that older adults could have neurological impairments, similar to Parkinson’s Disease, after long-term exposure to manganese in drinking water.

During a questions and answers session at the meeting, which was attended by about 100 Earleville residents despite the hastily scheduled session on the Memorial Day holiday weekend, Ed Lavin, a West View Shores resident who said he does not have a water filtration system, questioned whether his visiting grandchildren might have been harmed by drinking water out of the tap.

He was advised that in the future infants and children under age 5 should only drink bottled water but that if the children were only visiting briefly, the past manganese pollutants from the home's water faucets would rapidly pass out of the children's bodies.

A Bayview Estates resident angrily complained that he was never advised by a real estate broker or the former owners of his home about the water issues in the community and said the water problems made it impossible to sell his home and diminished his property's value.

Meanwhile, the MDE-mandated program to provide free bottled water to local residents began on Saturday with a limited distribution program from a truck parked outside the Bo Manor meeting site. Residents were required to sign up for current and future free bottled water—a gallon of water per person per day—or 7 gallons of water per person per week. But only 6 gallons of water were available, regardless of the family size of affected residents, at the Chesapeake City distribution site.

Area residents were required to sign up for future home delivery of water by a private contractor, Eastern Shore Coffee and Water of Salisbury, MD, in either one-gallon jugs or heavy 5-gallon water dispensers. If residents do not already have stands to hold and dispense the large 5-gallon water bottles, they would have to pay fees to rent the dispenser. But one-gallon jugs would be totally free.

All members of the District 36 House of Delegates delegation representing the Earleville area attended the meeting: Dels. Jay Jacobs, Steve Arentz and Jeff Ghrist. For Jacobs it was the latest of many Pearce Creek meeting he has attended, going back to the January 2013 session that disclosed the US Geological Survey's landmark independent study that first confirmed that the dumpsite had altered the aquifers in the area and polluted local wells. Also attending was Cecilton Mayor Joseph Zang, who led the charge to convince state and federal agencies to build the pipeline from his town to serve the Earleville residents.

Cecil County Executive Tari Moore was absent but county Director of Administration Al Wein attended the meeting.