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St. Croix Water Crisis: WAPA Says Lead Levels Extremely High; Bryan Weighs State of Emergency, Encourages Residents to Disconnect Ice Machines

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Retailers warned against increasing the cost of bottled water, with Bryan vowing to punish "anybody who has taken advantage of our residents in this current situation because it's very serious."

At a press briefing on Tuesday afternoon, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. joined Water and Power officials to provide clarity and updates on the lead and copper contamination recently discovered at various points in the St. Croix water distribution network.

The governor began by clarifying that the "no-drinking" advisory is just for the four communities directly affected by the heavy metal contamination – Colquhoun, Mon Bijou, Castle Burke and

Diamond - although he noted that the specificity was not intended to “discourage those residing or working outside of these affected areas from taking precautionary measures.”

Meanwhile, Don Gregoire, WAPA’s director of Water Distribution, told the listening audience that of the 66 samples initially tested, 35 showed high levels of lead, reaching 20,000 parts per million at one location “which is extremely high,” he noted. Fifteen locations sampled returned test results showing high levels of copper. WAPA is currently operating under the assumption that “it may be some of the old service lines that may be causing the high concentration of lead,” Mr. Gregoire remarked, noting that the contamination was discovered after the Environmental Protection Agency began to assist with tackling the [brown discoloration issue St. Croix residents had been complaining about](#). However, as Governor Bryan pointed out, the lead and copper contamination issue seems to have cropped up in recent months, as tests conducted in September of last year did not raise any concerning results.

As WAPA indicated in a previous announcement, additional testing is now being done in an attempt to corroborate the initial results. Governor Bryan says that if “further testing confirms unsafe levels in these areas, we will consider issuing a state of emergency that will avail us [of] the resources of FEMA and the federal government.” However, he emphasized that he did not wish to make any hasty decisions. “I am just hesitant to issue a state of emergency just yet until we have a firm grip on what the problem is.”

Logistical challenges must be overcome to ensure the swift return of test results, however. “Part of the challenge is we don’t really have labs on the island, and the EPA was giving us one or two weeks in terms of return,” the governor noted, saying that suitable laboratories have been identified in Puerto Rico, where samples can be sent by air. “Some good news is we recently discovered that we do have a machine at the Department of Health now that can identify lead in water,” he added.

Even after the second batch of tests have been completed, Governor Bryan vowed to keep an eye on water quality. “We’re going to test it again and we’re going to continue to test it until I feel that my residents are safe and secure,” he said, suggesting that the testing regime might run at least until the end of the year.

In the interim, several schools have received deliveries of bottled water, as well as bulk water for cooking and other purposes. For residents, Governor Bryan appealed to water vendors not to push prices to unreasonable levels, and vowed to “penalize and punish anybody who has taken advantage of our residents in this current situation because it’s very serious.”

In addition to the recommendations already made by WAPA and reiterated by Government House, Governor Bryan reminded the public to disconnect ice machines that may be connected to the municipal supply in affected areas. He promised further updates in the next few days, and urged residents to be patient and refrain from panicking, while taking every precaution to keep themselves and their families safe. “Many people depend on this water for daily use including consumption, and we here at Government House are no different,” said the territory’s chief executive, vowing to maintain a proactive stance when it comes to solving St. Croix’s latest water crisis.