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St. Croix Water Quality Unified Command Praying For Good News But Planning for Worst Possible Outcome

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A water fountain . By. GETTY IMAGES

Members of the St. Croix Water Quality Unified Command has said they have already taken the initiative to “plan for the worst and prepare” in the event that additional water samples sent to Puerto Rico for lead and copper testing return positive results.

Results of ten samples collected on October 20th are expected within the coming days, said VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen, who during a press conference on Tuesday addressed continued concerns over water quality in St. Croix.

Now more than a week since elevated levels of harmful heavy metal contaminants were discovered in water samples taken from several locations on St. Croix, concerns are still rife. The

Unified Command has promised full transparency to the public, stating that “any samples returning back positive will be considered a public health issue.”

Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said that while a hotline is in place to support members of the public who are concerned about the impact of pipe-borne water on their health, none of the twelve individuals who did call in with concerns continued on to get tested at a medical facility. One individual who sought care at a clinical laboratory is still awaiting results, Ms. Encarnacion explained.

Several lawmakers have called for [price freezes](#) on bottled water, distribution of safe water within communities, and the institution of a [state of emergency](#). The latter suggestion has been [dismissed as currently premature](#) by Governor Albert Bryan. As officials await the test results, the St. Croix Water Quality Unified Command, which includes officials from agencies such as the V.I. Water and Power Authority and the V.I. Department of Health, continue to engage in “daily tactics and planning meetings” where members “develop strategies and contingency plans for resampling,” according to Mr. Jaschen, the VITEMA director.

During Tuesday’s press briefing, WAPA CEO Andrew Smith reiterated that “we believe the source of lead and copper in the supplemental samples is our distribution system and not the water produced for WAPA by Seven Seas Water.” This theory is based on the observation that “if the source water produced by Seven Seas [Water] contained elevated levels of lead or copper, then elevated samples would be expected to be found throughout WAPA’s system, and that is not the case,” Mr. Smith stated.

Mr. Smith said WAPA is taking the situation “very seriously” and “understands the importance of taking the appropriate steps to develop a path forward.” Once sample results return from the EPA certified lab in Puerto Rico, they will be reviewed by the authority, the EPA, and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. “Our primary goal is to safeguard public health and ensure that our community does not drink water that could be harmful,” he said.