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# DPNR Directs WAPA to Adopt STT-STJ Water Treatment Methods in St. Croix Among Other Remedial Demands; CEO Andrew Smith Faces Calls for Public Apology

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**A storage tank at WAPA's power plant in Richmond, Christiansted, St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM**

Even as authorities seek to calibrate their response to the discovery of heavy metal contamination at various points in St. Croix's water distribution system, sections of civil society are calling for a more proactive approach.

A press release on Thursday issued by the USVI Joint Information Center announced that results from the retesting of samples "confirm the presence of elevated levels of lead and copper above the 15 parts per billion action level established by the EPA." In response, officials expanded the administration's "no-drink" advisory beyond the initial four locations to the entire island of St. Croix. "However, in accordance with EPA guidance, residents may continue to bathe, flush, launder clothes, and clean with the water without danger of adverse effects."

Late Friday, another press release clarified the findings of the tests. On October 19, tests were done at "four locations that are considered sensitive and served a large population" – John H. Woodson Jr. High, Alfredo Andrews Elementary, St. Croix Educational Vocational School/C-Tech, the Mt. Pleasant Housing Complex, and the Seven Seas water production location in Estate Richmond. A total of 10 samples were collected, with all of them falling below established Environmental Protection Agency Action Levels for both lead and copper. Six of the 10 samples had undetectable levels of lead.

Two days later, on October 21, authorities conducted another set of testing. Two samples were taken at each of the 37 locations that were initially sampled on October 13 – a "first draw" sample, and a "post-flush" sample. Elevated lead levels were found in all 37 "first draw" samples, and elevated copper levels detected in 5. In contrast, only one "post-flush" sample contained lead levels beyond Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) thresholds, and no "post-flush" sample showed alarming levels of copper. "Considering the above findings, flushing the water before use shows a significant reduction in the concentration of lead and copper in the WAPA water," officials concluded.

Nevertheless, out of "deep concern for the health and wellbeing of the people of this community," the Department of Planning and Natural Resources says it has ordered the Water and Power Authority to take several actions. These include changing the way WAPA treats corrosion on St. Croix to mirror what obtains in the St. Thomas/St. John distribution system; the immediate implementation of an ongoing comprehensive sampling system at various key points in the St. Croix distribution system; and the immediate replacement of several brass components in up to 10 locations that registered the highest levels of lead contamination. Customers in the 37 locations tested will be advised to flush their municipal water supply for 5-10 minutes every day before first using the water.

These actions don't go far enough for one community organization. Instead of leaving it up to residents to figure out how to supply themselves with safe drinking water, Our Town Frederiksted (OTF) wants WAPA to take swift ameliorative action for the benefit of its consumers. First, OTF wants "certified lead-removal water filters" to be supplied to affected residents – at WAPA's expense – "ensuring that residents have access to safe drinking water without delay," according to a statement from the advocacy organization. OTF also calls on WAPA to communicate a detailed timeline for the distribution of these filters, as well as safe drinking water, to these households.

OTF also does not want WAPA customers to be billed for the water that is currently being flushed through pipes and taps as residents attempt to comply with the official guidance. "It is unacceptable for impacted customers to be burdened with utility bills for water that has been compromised by lead contamination," the organization said. "WAPA should ensure that these customers are not charged for the period during which their water was unsafe."

OTF is also calling for a website to be online within 2 weeks, showing interactive maps with time-stamped details of testing locations, test frequency, test results, current condition of water lines, and timeline for replacement of water lines. Weekly press releases should complement the

website, to ensure that community members are well-informed about updates to the water situation.

Their final request reveals what the St. Croix community might find so galling about the discovery of lead and copper contamination in their potable water supply. Concerns that residents have been raising for years regarding the discoloration of their water "were often met with indifference," OTF says, referring to a September 12 press briefing in which WAPA CEO Andrew Smith [offered reassurances](#) that the water was not unsafe for use. "These dismissive statements, combined with the alarming findings of lead contamination, have left our community deeply troubled," OTF says. In light of WAPA's belated discovery that there was, in fact, something wrong with the water, OTF says that it would only be right for Mr. Smith to "issue a public apology to the residents of St. Croix for downplaying their concerns and failing to acknowledge the severity of the water quality issues."

Such an apology is important, says OTF, because "our community deserves accountability." Governor Albert Bryan Jr. is now [preparing a case](#) for the issuance of a declaration of emergency by President Biden.

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