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St. Croix Water Contamination Linked to Stagnant Service Areas; Financial Assistance to Customers May Soon Be Announced

Anticipated Financial Assistance Program for WAPA Customers in Development

Health / **Published On November 03, 2023 06:34 AM /**

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A host of officials from various government departments and agencies convened on Thursday to meet with journalists regarding the water emergency on St. Croix, seeking to provide clarity on the concerning, yet highly technical situation.

One question from the Consortium was why, despite years of "brown water" complaints from residents, authorities only recently decided to conduct testing to investigate the phenomenon. Noel Hodge, the Water and Power Authority's director of water distribution, said that it was a surge in

the discoloration issue over the summer that prompted the probe. Having already begun to replace old metal piping with non-corrosive PVC pipes, that surge in complaints, attributed to the sargassum influx and drought that severely restricted the flow of water on St. Croix, "made us take a second look," said Mr. Hodge.

WAPA, together with the Department of Natural Resources and the Environmental Protection Agency, then jointly decided to conduct the additional testing that found the heavy metal contamination.

However, WAPA officials continued to stress that the lead and copper contamination found in several water samples [weeks ago](#) was an isolated issue, despite an islandwide no-drink advisory for St. Croix that was issued by the EPA out of "an abundance of caution," according to Austin Callwood, director of environmental protection at DPNR.

Following queries to ascertain just how long this problem could have been occurring, WAPA CEO Andrew Smith explained that the most recent testing for compliance with federal drinking water standards was conducted in September of this year, with 97 percent of those samples (from the taps of consumers) meeting the standard. The EPA, Mr. Smith said, requires 90 percent of samples taken for compliance testing meet federal standards, and thus WAPA, at least in September, was above that threshold.

The testing that turned up the heavy metal contamination, Mr. Smith explained, was separate and apart from that last round of compliance testing, and specifically targeted areas for sampling that WAPA knew had low throughput of water. "We identified areas of St. Croix that are low flow or sort of dead ends of our system, because one of the things that causes more brown water is less water flow," Mr. Smith said. It was in these low flow areas that the alarming results were reported, which Mr. Smith said came as a surprise to WAPA.

Mr. Callwood, the DPNR environmental protection director, noted that those areas were "endpoints, where service meters were not in service, and the water could conceivably have been sitting for months, maybe even years, and not being used."

Harold Mark, environment program manager at DPNR, also reiterated that retesting in areas of concern has supported the notion that the contamination issue is limited to places where water sits stagnant for extended periods of time. Follow up monitoring has been scheduled, Mr. Mark said, "particularly in locations in which newer service lines are being installed." This is to gather more data with which authorities can make comparisons between areas with service lines with new, more compliant material and those areas with older lines in which the water contamination has been detected.

When it comes to determining where exactly the contamination is coming from, "we're still doing that analysis," said Mr. Hodge. However, authorities are confident that old pipe fittings were to blame. Mr. Hodge noted that the EPA revised lead guidelines in 2014, and thus installations prior to that may have used materials that had a higher lead concentration than what is now allowed.

When it comes to solving the issue, WAPA officials have committed to working through the monumental replacement exercises that will be necessary. The completion of the project to replace the entire water distribution system is still two to three decades away, but smaller projects to replace the oldest service lines as well as problematic fittings can be finished faster. "We're gathering some more information and logistics to say...this is the schedule and we'll have it done by this date. So please, be patient with us," Mr. Hodge asked, noting that WAPA has almost 7000 customers and water systems to keep track of.

Whether WAPA customers will be assisted financially by the authority remains to be seen. According to Mr. Smith, "we are working closely with Government House on a program to address exactly that." An official announcement on the subject, he promised, would soon be forthcoming.

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