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Testimony of West Virginia Secretary of State Natalie E. Tennant

U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

Subcommittee on Water and Wildlife hearing entitled, "Examination of the Safety and Security of Drinking Water Supplies Following the Central West Virginia Drinking Water Crisis"

Tuesday, February 4, 2014

Thank you Chairman Boxer, Ranking Member Vitter, Subcommittee Chair Cardin, Ranking Member Boozman, and all members of the committee for holding this hearing and inviting me to share the challenges West Virginia families and businesses are facing in the aftermath of the water crisis that left 300,000 residents of nine West Virginia counties without access to clean, safe water.

Thank you Madam Chair, and our West Virginia Senators, Jay Rockefeller and Joe Manchin for your swift response in introducing *The Chemical Safety and Drinking Water Protection Act of 2014*. In particular, I appreciate the provisions in the bill aimed at providing greater transparency and public information.

I also encourage you to consider developing measures to ensure that when existing safety standards are unavailable (as was the case with MCHM), individuals from local health departments, county governments and members of the public are included in the development of safety thresholds.

Lack of consistent, trustworthy information has been among our greatest challenges and frustrations in the aftermath of the Elk River chemical spill. Your legislation will go a long way toward providing the public with better resources and information in the future.

Call for Answers

At the same time, West Virginians need answers now.

The water ban has been lifted, but inconsistent information has left many West Virginians still wondering whether their water is safe.

First we were told one chemical leaked into our water. Then we were told about another.

First we were told 7,500 gallons. Then it was raised to 10,000.

One day we were told the water was safe after flushing, and days later, we were told pregnant women should not drink the water. That just doesn't add up. Either our water is safe or it is not.

As recently as Friday, disturbing reports showed detectable levels of MCHM still present in the water of at least five West Virginia schools.

People are fed up. They are angry, and they are scared.

Several people showed up at a town hall in Charleston last week with rashes they believe are connected to their water. Others have complained of headaches, nausea and vomiting. Families are melting snow to give their kids baths.

As the mother of an 11-year-old daughter living in Kanawha County, I share their concerns.

As their Secretary of State, I demand answers, and I ask this Committee to help me get them.

I've called on the Center for Disease Control to release its testing and methodology and explain to West Virginians how it determined what levels of MCHM are safe in our water.

On Friday, I launched a petition for West Virginians to join my call for answers. More than 100 people signed on in the first hour alone.

"The truth is all I ask for," one signer wrote.

Each one of those signatures is a mom, dad, friend or neighbor. They deserve to know with 100 percent certainty that what's coming out of their faucets will not harm them and their families.

Long-term Study Needed

This weekend I met with Dr. Rahul Gupta, Executive Director at Kanawha-Charleston Health Department.

According to Dr. Gupta, the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department has not received any valid, scientific knowledge about the possibilities of long-term symptoms, including cancer or birth defects, that exposure to MCHM may cause over the long-term.

Dr. Gupta is proposing a 10-year study to monitor the long-tem health and well-being of community members affected by exposure to MCHM.

I urge this Committee to work with my office, Dr. Gupta, the Health Department, and state and local officials to provide the resources we need to begin this study right away.

As one father wrote to me last week, "we are accountable for our children's health and future."

We owe it to them to conduct this study.

Economy Cannot Recover Until Public Trust is Earned

As Secretary of State, my office is on the front lines working with West Virginia businesses every day – businesses like Bridge Road Bistro, famous in Charleston for its Sunday breakfast buffet and live music on Wednesday nights.

Bridge Road's manager Sandy Call told my office they lost $40,000 during the do-not-use ban. Reopening cost another $3,000, and Bridge Road Bistro has spent another $36,000 on bagged ice, bottled water and canned soda to reassure customers who are still uneasy about tap water. Sandy estimates this will continue to cost an extra $500 a day indefinitely until public trust in the water is regained.

And, it is not just our businesses that took a hit during the ban. Sandy estimates her workers lost $30,000 in wages and tips.

The day after the spill, I went up to Riverside High School in Quincy to help hand out water. The school, which should have been filled with children learning, sat empty with a giant tanker truck out front and lines of people holding on to every container they could find, waiting for the chance to fill them with water.

I met the manager of a local Shoney's and an Arby's worker there in line, both forced off work because of the water ban. These folks work hard to make ends meet on minimum wage and tips. Every hour on the clock goes toward a bill that needs paid, gas for the car, or food for their families. After as many as 10 days forced out of work, too many workers just like them are left fearful, wondering how they will make this month's mortgage or pay the daycare bill.

Tiffany, an employee at a local hotel told me she wasn't quite sure how she would make up the income she lost. But she was giving away her shifts to co-workers, because they had families to support and needed the extra time more than she did.

That is just the kind of people we West Virginians are.

Thanks to the generosity of folks from around West Virginia and all across the country, the United Way has raised more than $70,000 to help our workers who lost shifts.

My office is working with the West Virginia State Legislature and the Governor's office to pass legislation that will provide much-needed support to our businesses.

And I thank the Small Business Administration for providing Economic Injury Disaster Loans to help small businesses impacted by the disaster. My office stands ready to assist with any information and paperwork that may be needed to complete those loans and get our businesses the help they need.

But our work is far from over. Calculating the loss to West Virginia's economy has been difficult. We may never be able to put a price on things like the time our children were not learning in the classrooms.

But the Charleston Visitors Bureau (CVB) says it has calculated about $1 million in losses from a survey of 12 businesses so far. The CVB estimates that $1 million would need to be multiplied by hundreds to get an overall estimate.

One thing is certain: our economy cannot recover until we regain public trust and confidence in our water supply.

Bringing in bottled water is costing our restaurants money and time that they should be spending growing their businesses and hiring new workers. Concerns over public health and safety jeopardize the tourism, on which, West Virginia relies. And our ability to attract new businesses and jobs to West Virginia is weakened as long as people do not trust the water.

We need answers we can trust.

On behalf of all West Virginians I thank you for holding this hearing, and again ask for your help in getting the information we need to restore public confidence in our water and protect against long-term health risks resulting from this crisis.

Attached:

January 17, 2014 Letter from the West Virginia Secretary of State Natalie Tennant to the Centers for Disease Control

Natalie E. Tennant
Secretary of State
State of West Virginia

January 17, 2014

Thomas Frieden, MD, MPH
Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333

Dear Dr. Frieden:

I write today to request your immediate attention and assistance regarding the public need for transparent information in the case of the chemical spill that contaminated the water supply for thousands of West Virginians last week.

I have spent days on water lines, talking with West Virginians who are justifiably concerned about the safety of the public water service. They deserve easily accessible information that will help restore their confidence in the water supply.

I request that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention take the lead in creating a website that provides clear and accessible answers to the many questions West Virginians have in one accessible and easy to use location.

As you know this is a multi-agency response involving federal, state, and local jurisdictions. A single source of public information would make it easier for concerned West Virginians to quickly find the answers they need to restore public confidence.

The website should provide information including a comprehensive timeline of events, color-coded maps of areas that have been deemed safe to use the water and those that have not, information about MCHM, and water test results.

Most importantly, the site should provide information about the methodology used to determine "safe" levels of MCHM in the water supply. In order for the public to regain confidence in the water supply, it is incumbent upon the responsible agencies to provide as much information as possible in an easily accessible and understandable format.

I await your response to this urgent request and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Natalie E. Tennant
West Virginia Secretary of State

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