

Weary and Worried West Virginia

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It's been one year since the over 300,000 W.Va. residents were without water for drinking, cooking, bathing, and other daily activities, and residents and experts are still concerned about the effects the leak will have on the future of the state's residents.

On Wednesday, Jan. 7, a news conference was held to reflect on the tragedy, to talk about present efforts to hold Freedom Industries accountable for the leak, and also what the future holds for W.Va.'s water.

The news conference consisted of talks by a panel of area activists, a professor at Wheeling Jesuit University, and a local mother who was pregnant at the time of the contamination. Janet Keating, executive director of the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition gave a brief summary of the events on Jan. 9, 2014.

Over one-sixth of the state's residents were without sanitary water during the crisis Jan. 2014, as 4-Methylcyclohexanemethanol (MCHM) and other coal cleaning chemicals leaked into the Elk River, just upstream from Charleston, the state capital. The events lead William Cooper, program director at the National Science Foundation, to call the leak "one of the largest human-made environmental disasters in this century."

Angie Rosser, the executive director of West Virginia Rivers Coalition spoke about Senate Bill 373, which was passed in response to the Elk River disaster, calling it "the most significant water protection bill that W.Va. has seen passed in a generation." The bill requires that all public water utilities develop and submit a source water protection program that identifies threats to the water source and presents strategies for managing the threats, as well as emergency response protocol. It also established new above-ground storage tank regulations, where tanks must be registered and undergo regular inspections, the first round of which were completed by Jan. 1. 1,100 did not pass inspection.

Dr. Ben Stout, aquatic biologist and professor at Wheeling Jesuit University was concerned that there isn't enough understanding of how toxic the substance actually was. He said, "Nobody in the state response really looked into it and asked the scientific community what they should do." He also noted that "If it hadn't been for the smell...we would never have known that this whole community had been exposed to a potentially toxic material."

Rebecca Roth, a Charleston-area mother who was pregnant and also had a small child during the crisis, summed up the feelings of many who were affected by disaster last year, saying, "We've lost the trust that people in other places have in their water systems and we want to get it back."