



U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

NEWS RELEASE

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EPA Update on Sequential Sampling Study, Next Steps to Address Lead in Drinking Water in St. Croix

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NEW YORK (December 7, 2023) As part of its continuing partnership with the U.S. Virgin Islands government to address lead identified in the water distribution system of St. Croix, today EPA is announcing that it has concluded its sequential sampling study and made a series of preliminary recommendations to its partners. Initial samples taken in September by EPA, the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), the University of the Virgin Islands and the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) at water distribution meters showed alarming levels of lead, but subsequent sampling data analyzed by EPA experts indicate the levels of lead at household taps are far lower than those found at the distribution meters. EPA has developed a preliminary list of recommended actions that the U.S. Virgin Islands government should take, including educating residents on steps they themselves can take at home to reduce exposure to lead, as well as improving the water system's corrosion control treatment and replacing components that contain lead in the distribution system. A final report on the sequential sampling study will be available by mid-December.

Of the 119 samples collected for the sequential sampling study at the 11 homes, three samples showed levels above the EPA's 15 parts per billion (ppb) Lead Action Level. Two of those samples were from the first draw closest to the tap (28.8 ppb; 18.4 ppb); the third was from water closer to the meter (23.2 ppb). The two first-draw results, closest to the tap, indicate the lead is likely stemming from the local plumbing within the faucet or the aerator; the third result, closer to the distribution meter, indicates the lead is likely stemming from the lead plumbing components in and around the distribution meter. The home with elevated lead closer to the distribution meter had a stagnation time of four days, versus the other homes with a six-hour stagnation, which may account for the lead levels in that sample.

"EPA takes seriously any instance of lead or potential for lead in drinking water, and I commend the U.S. Virgin Islands government and WAPA for taking immediate action to advise people not to consume the water, to collect more samples, begin replacing components in the system and develop a voucher program," said EPA Regional Administrator Lisa F. Garcia. "What we initially

saw from samples collected in September showed very high levels of lead. While those samples were not from a part of the water system that is normally sampled, EPA and the Virgin Islands government had a responsibility to take decisive action and investigate the situation further.”

Garcia added, “The levels of lead we have been seeing in subsequent sampling, including our detailed sequential sampling study, are much lower than those initial samples. But they do show some lead. This confirms the need to ensure that proper steps are being taken by the water provider and by consumers to protect people and reduce the potential exposure to lead.”

As part of its work with the USVI government to better understand the contents of the red and brown water seen coming out of household taps on St. Croix, EPA analyzed samples taken at distribution meters to determine their metal content. These results showed high levels of lead and copper, prompting immediate action from both EPA and the U.S. Virgin Islands government.

After examining the results of a November sequential sampling study and considering data generated from sampling since September, EPA is working closely with the Virgin Islands government to lay a path to lift the recommendation that people on St. Croix not consume WAPA water from the distribution system.

“EPA has been working with the U.S. Virgin Islands from the very beginning to narrow down our understanding of what the sources of the high levels of lead were, and we feel we have sufficient information to guide the next steps,” Regional Administrator Garcia added.

Levels of lead that were found at the private home taps during EPA’s sampling study are consistent with levels seen in other communities across the country. While no level of lead is safe, there are practical steps that people can take to reduce their exposure to lead from their household water. These include flushing their pipes before consuming water, regularly cleaning their aerators (faucet screen) to remove sediment and debris, and properly using and maintaining a water filter certified to remove lead.

Before residents begin to consume water from the WAPA distribution system again, EPA is requesting that USVI regulatory agencies and WAPA develop and implement a comprehensive plan to educate the public about steps they can take to reduce their exposure to lead in drinking water. Implementation of this plan will help reduce the risk of lead in the drinking water and allow residents to resume consumption of the water if they follow guidelines provided in the educational campaign.

EPA also recommends that WAPA address the lead from the distribution system, including optimizing corrosion control on St. Croix and replacing components containing lead in the distribution system. The U.S. Virgin Islands is already beginning to undertake EPA’s recommendations.

The local and subsequent federal emergency declarations are focused on lead. While the red/brown discoloration issues with the water may not indicate an immediate health threat, EPA recognizes that these issues are still serious and need attention. Some of the measures being undertaken to reduce lead both by consumers and by the system may also help the red and brown discoloration and EPA will continue to consult with the U.S Virgin Islands to address that problem.

EPA will hold a hybrid public meeting to update the public and will post the details of this meeting on its website. For more information about EPA's work regarding U.S. Virgin Islands drinking water and for further updates, please [visit our U.S. Virgin Islands drinking water website](#).

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