

Biden declares emergency over lead in water in US Virgin Islands

November 22 2023, by Michael Phillis



President Joe Biden speaks to members of the media before boarding Air Force One in Norfolk, Va., Nov. 19, 2023. Biden declared an emergency over lead contamination in the U.S. Virgin Islands water after tests on St. Croix revealed levels more than 100 times the limits set by the Environmental Protection Agency. Credit: AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta, File

President Joe Biden declared an emergency over lead-in-water contamination in the U.S. Virgin Islands earlier this week after tests on St. Croix revealed levels more than 100 times the limits set by the Environmental Protection Agency—among the worst results a U.S. community has seen in decades.

"On a personal level, it's been frightening and frustrating," said resident Frandelle Gerard, executive director of Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism, Inc.

Officials told residents to stop using their taps and began distributing vouchers for bottled water. Lead can have devastating effects on childhood development, behavior and IQ scores.

But experts consulted by The Associated Press said the [frightening results](#) may be false because they came from testing that does not meet EPA standards.

"The data should be thrown into the garbage," said Marc Edwards, a Virginia Tech lead and water expert who helped identify the lead problems in Flint, Michigan.

If the information given to St. Croix residents turns out to be bad, it won't be the first time that's happened. Poor information often plagues communities, and they are often majority-Black communities, facing lead crises, leaving people unsure what to believe. In Flint, officials initially concealed high lead levels. When levels spiked in Newark, officials emphasized the safety of the city's reservoirs even though it is lead pipes—not the source—that are usually the problem. In Benton Harbor, Michigan, residents waited months for officials to confirm that filters truly work, relying on bottled water.

On the Caribbean island of St. Croix, officials avoided some of those

pitfalls and quickly told residents of the results. The governor declared an emergency.

"This is not something that we shy away from talking about," said Andrew Smith, head of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority.

Edwards does not believe the sky-high results reflect reality and said the problem is how the samples were collected. For lead testing, workers usually take water from a household faucet. But the samples that tested so high on St. Croix were collected from the meter.

"When you (unscrew) it, you are literally ripping the leaded-brass apart and a chunk of leaded-brass gets in your sample," he said. It produces artificially high results.

Tom Neltner, a chemical and lead expert at the Environmental Defense Fund, agreed that testing from the water meter isn't accurate. "There's a lot of oddities" about how St. Croix's sampling was done, he said.

Parents in St. Croix therefore still have no idea how much lead their kids were consuming.

Here's what is known:

In September, officials tested in the normal way, at faucets, following EPA lead testing rules. Those results showed the water was safe.

But island residents, who had long dealt with discolored water, said the color was getting even worse in recent months. So officials took more samples, this time at the meter, to see whether the utility's pipes were the problem. It is some of these tests that first recorded astronomically high lead levels.

"We were all shocked and surprised by the results," Smith said.

Retesting found results were still too high. Other locations including two schools, however, were low.

A more definitive answer should come soon. Local and federal officials did detailed testing to find the root cause in early November. A final report is expected in mid-December.

Smith said about 3,400 homes are affected and that the utility worked with EPA on the sampling.

Even though the tests didn't follow the normal procedure, EPA water expert Christine Ash said "out of an abundance of caution, we are recommending that folks who use (utility) water piped to their homes not consume the water until we're able to do further investigation to identify if there is a potential source of lead and what it might be."

Fortunately on St. Croix, that doesn't include everyone.

A lot of people rely on rainwater they collect in cisterns.

On the mainland, in many cities, lead pipes are the main threat to drinking water. That's not the problem on the island, however. Instead, it's brass fittings that contain lead and can corrode into the water, Smith said.

And regardless of the test results, the water system needs attention and fixing. Smith and his colleagues are flushing water through it. When people don't use the water, it sits and can pick up contaminants. They are also fixing how they treat their water so it is less corrosive and working to replace components that contain lead. That replacement work might take 12 to 18 months, Smith said. Plus, the island's water system is old

and in the coming years, major upgrades are planned.

Gerard said people on the island are overwhelmed.

"There's this sense of well, what's next for St. Croix?" she said, adding that residents have endured a devastating hurricane, the pandemic and water contamination from a refinery, all in recent years. Many people gave up on tap water long ago, she said, and it's hard to know what to make of these latest developments.

"As a fairly literate person, reading the reports has almost left us with more questions than answers." Many people probably don't understand just how high these lead test results are, she said.

As for the temporary measure of flushing lots of water through the pipes to reduce lead, it's ill-suited to the island, she said.

"We're a water conserving society," Gerard said. "Water is a precious commodity."

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Citation: Biden declares emergency over lead in water in US Virgin Islands (2023, November 22) retrieved 29 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-11-biden-declares-emergency-virgin-islands.html>

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