

St. Croix tap water remains unsafe to drink as US Virgin Islands offer short-term solutions

January 18 2024, by Dánica Coto



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

With no date in sight for when it will be safe to drink tap water again on the island of St. Croix, officials in the U.S. Virgin Islands announced

Wednesday night that they would distribute water filters and provide free lead and copper testing as they work on long-term solutions.

The newest measures were unveiled at a virtual town hall held months after people in St. Croix complained about red and brown [water](#) coming out of their taps. The complaints led to the governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands to declare a state of emergency in November after an investigation found high levels of lead and copper. [U.S. President Joe Biden also declared an emergency](#) later that month.

Subsequent studies by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found lead levels at people's homes were significantly lower than those reported previously at distribution meters. The agency said that of the 119 samples collected at nearly a dozen homes in St. Croix, only three samples showed levels higher than those recommended by the EPA, [according to a report released in late December](#).

Local authorities conducted their own study, analyzing 31 samples collected from kitchen taps. All were found to be within U.S. [federal standards](#), said Don Gregoire, water director for St. Croix.

Despite those findings, people on St. Croix remain concerned.

"Everyone knows the water is still not safe," a woman who identified herself as Shirley Smith said during the virtual town hall.

She called on local officials to set more stringent standards for lead and copper in water, saying the federal ones are "not acceptable."

Echoing her remarks, another woman, who identified herself only as C.J. said, "The ideal lead level is zero."

Authorities agreed, saying they are in talks about the issue.

So far, the U.S. Virgin Islands government's response has included distribution of thousands of water vouchers, a \$75 water bill credit, installation of lead-free meter boxes and other equipment, and free lead testing for children up to 6 years old.

At least 1,270 people on St. Croix have been screened. Three have tested positive for lead, six others tested positive for copper and 17 are awaiting final results.

Authorities plan to extend the screening to the islands of St. Thomas and St. John by the end of January, said Reuben Molloy, acting commissioner for the U.S. Virgin Islands Health Department.

On Thursday, officials will start distributing free [water filters](#) as they continue to test [water samples](#) taken from homes and businesses across St. Croix.

Long-term solutions include eliminating corrosion from water distribution lines and overhauling the entire system, a more than \$1.5 billion project that would take an estimated 20 years to complete, said Noel Hodge, [chief operating officer](#) for water in St. Croix.

So far, \$30 million in federal funds has been allocated to the Water and Power Authority in St. Croix, which treats up to 3 million gallons of drinking water a day and serves up to 40% of the island's 41,000 residents, according to the EPA.

In its report, the EPA found that the water agency's distribution system is more than 60 years old and deteriorating.

Gregoire said federal funds are needed to replace the entire system because the water agency is allocated only \$5 million to \$7 million a year.

"The couple million that we've been getting will definitely not cover the replacement," he said, adding that officials are looking at upgrading pump stations as well. "It's basically bringing our water system up to industry standards."

Residents participating in the virtual meeting peppered officials with questions and their concerns.

"These pipes are older than me. I'm 23 years old," said C.J. "Mothers use the pipe water for formula."

When a reporter asked officials when they believe it would be safe to drink [tap water](#) again in St. Croix, there was a moment of silence. The host then asked Harold Mark with the Department of Natural Resources to reply.

He said it all depends on data still being collected, with new results expected in the coming weeks.

© 2024 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: St. Croix tap water remains unsafe to drink as US Virgin Islands offer short-term solutions (2024, January 18) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-st-croix-unsafe-virgin-islands.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.