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Agencies to host public meeting in North Pole about solvent in well water

State, local and Flint Hills refinery representatives to answer questions about sulfolane

(Anchorage, AK) — Two state departments will host a special town meeting in North Pole on Thursday, Feb. 18, to answer questions and provide new information about a solvent that was detected in well water near the Flint Hills refinery last fall.

Representatives from the Alaska departments of Health and Social Services and Environmental Conservation will participate in the public town meeting from 7 to 11 p.m. at the North Pole High School. Representatives from the City of North Pole and Flint Hills Resources also will attend and be available to answer questions.

In 2001, refinery owners started testing onsite groundwater for sulfolane, an industrial solvent most commonly used to make gasoline. In October 2009, Flint Hills detected sulfolane in new monitoring wells drilled north of the refinery boundary and near wells serving private homes. Since that time, state health and environmental officials and Flint Hills launched an effort to test private well water and evaluate the health implications of sulfolane in drinking water. Flint Hills has offered bottled water to those affected. Limited studies are available on the solvent's health effects. No studies are available on the chronic health effects of sulfolane.

"We're frustrated that there isn't more information available about sulfolane," said Dr. Lori Verbrugge, toxicologist with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS). "Although we don't have any evidence to suggest that the levels of sulfolane in North Pole's private wells are dangerous, we simply don't know for sure whether the levels that some people may have been drinking for years are harmful or not."

"We're looking into the question of past exposures, and plan to have more information for the community later this year. The public's concerns are our priority, and we appreciate their interest in working with us to address those concerns."

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Due to the limited information about sulfolane's health effects, DHSS asked the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to recommend an "action level" for drinking water. An action level is a setting that determines when health officials may intervene, such as asking people to switch to alternative sources of drinking water. This month, the federal agency published its recommended action levels for sulfolane. Today, Alaska's health department is issuing a companion report to explain how these levels were derived from animal studies and computer modeling — the only data available for the health effects of sulfolane.

Given the lack of studies that look at sulfolane's effects in people, the recommended action levels are set conservatively low with built-in layers of protection for human health. Furthermore, recommended actions are already taking place. The Flint Hills refinery has been giving affected residents bottled water, and is working with the City of North Pole on plans to connect residents to the city's water supply to provide long-term protection against sulfolane exposure.

At this time, Alaska health officials do not believe that North Pole residents will get sick, even if they have been drinking water with sulfolane concentrations higher than the recommended action levels.

"We don't think people will get sick, but we can't be sure they're completely safe — so we're recommending a lower limit for sulfolane and that people drink from alternative sources of water," Verbrugge said. "That makes the most sense, in light of all the uncertainty and our desire to be cautious."

For More Information:

To read copies of the federal and state reports about sulfolane, visit the following Web site: <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us/eh/default.stm>

State North Pole Refinery/Sulfolane Web site and Frequently Asked Questions: <http://www.dec.state.ak.us/spar/csp/sites/npolerefinery.htm>

DHSS is now on Twitter. Follow health updates at www.twitter.com/Alaska_DHSS.

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