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DEC Continues Protection of North Pole Drinking Water; Studies Are Initiated to Determine Effects of Long Term Exposure to Sulfolane

(JUNEAU, AK) – The National Toxicology Program (NTP) has initiated new studies to address important data gaps regarding exposure to sulfolane, an industrial solvent used primarily in natural gas and petroleum refining. Of particular concern to the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is the lack of information on the effects of long-term exposure to this chemical that has impacted the drinking water supplies in and near North Pole, Alaska.

The NTP is a federal program that uses a science-based approach to evaluate environmental contaminants of public health concern. The NTP elected to study sulfolane at the request of DEC. A 2-year study initiated in May 2015 will evaluate the effects of long-term exposure to sulfolane. The NTP study is expected to provide a clearer picture of the risks associated with sulfolane exposure.

“This key piece of information has yet to be adequately addressed by the scientific community studying sulfolane. We need this information to make a sound decision when setting a cleanup level for the contaminant,” stated DEC’s Director of the Division of Spill Prevention and Response, Kristin Ryan.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) concurs that the NTP studies on sulfolane will provide valuable information. Mr. Richard Albright, Director of the EPA Region 10 Office of Environmental Cleanup, stated, “Given the uncertainty that exists regarding the toxicity values associated with sulfolane, and the high number of residents who potentially face direct exposure to the chemical in their drinking water, EPA strongly encourages DEC to wait until the NTP study is completed before setting a sulfolane cleanup level for groundwater.”

Flint Hills Resources Alaska (FHRA), owner of the North Pole Refinery, currently provides alternative drinking water to an estimated 1,500 people residing in the impacted area. While the NTP studies progress, FHRA is obligated to continue to provide drinking water, and DEC will continue to work with Flint Hills to clean up contamination on the refinery property and track migration of the expanding area impacted by sulfolane.

DEC is continuing to review the FHRA proposal of a 362 parts per billion cleanup level for sulfolane. At present, a cleanup level for sulfolane does not exist. DEC believes a comprehensive review and determination of an appropriate cleanup level cannot be complete until information from the NTP studies is available. Until a cleanup level is set, residents with detectable levels of sulfolane will be provided alternative drinking water.

“Our first and most important consideration is protection of human health. These studies, now underway, will provide information critical to set a cleanup level that protects the hundreds of adults and children whose drinking water is impacted by the sulfolane contamination,” stated Ryan.

DEC will also continue working with the City of North Pole on construction projects where sulfolane-contaminated water is encountered. State and local officials are evaluating the feasibility of expanding a public water supply in the North Pole area.

According to Dr. Ali Hamade, Environmental Public Health Program Manager for the Alaska Division of Public Health, affected North Pole area residents should continue to use the alternative water provided by FHRA for drinking, cooking, and watering gardens.

DEC will keep the public informed throughout the NTP studies and sulfolane cleanup level review process. A newsletter providing an overall project status update is in preparation, and an Open House will be held in North Pole in late summer to provide an opportunity for community members to visit with experts in the field and discuss project issues in-depth.

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For more information on the sulfolane investigation at the North Pole Refinery, please see <http://dec.alaska.gov/spar/csp/sites/north-pole-refinery/>.