



POTOMAC RIVER SHEEN EVENT BRIEF

February 1, 2017

On November 27, 2016, a sheen of unknown origin was seen on the Potomac River near Whites Ferry. White's Ferry officials notified staff at the NRG electric generating station in Dickerson Maryland, who reported the sheen to the National Response Center. Maryland Department of the Environment, the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin and others were then notified to take actions to respond to the spill and protect drinking water supplies.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as the lead response agency for the non-tidal portion of the Potomac River, led the response, including establishment of a Unified Command of federal and state responding agencies. EPA released the initial Incident Response Plan on November 30, 2016. The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments established a communication process among the region's drinking water utilities and federal/state responders as the water utilities were not included in the Unified Command.

Initial tests by regional water utilities indicated the material was a mid-volatile petroleum product. The material could not be treated by drinking water treatment plants, so the water utilities took actions including monitoring presence of the sheen, deploying protective booms, and opening or closing water intakes affected by the sheen to protect the quality of drinking water supplies.

The EPA worked with state and regional responders to identify the source of the sheen in order to identify the responsible party, stop the release, and clean up as needed. EPA also used oil spill response contractors to deploy boom to protect critical infrastructure to supplement protective actions by the region's drinking water utilities.

The Unified Command agencies positively identified the source of the sheen as the NRG Dickerson power station on December 5, 2016. NRG was added to the Unified Command. Assessment of the source of the spill within the NRG plant and clean up continued through mid-December, at which time the Command Center and mobile laboratories were decommissioned. Boom remained in place to continue to protect water supply intakes from remaining deposits of sheen and resulting mousse (foam formed from the sheen).

The region's drinking water utilities are undertaking an after-action report to identify lessons learned from the sheen event and recommend next steps. Of critical concern is that the EPA focused on finding the responsible party for the sheen and did not appear to recognize the risk to and the need to protect the region's drinking water supplies. The drinking water utilities are concerned that this may have resulted in a delay in the release being contained and stopped. Additionally, drinking water utilities lacked timely situational awareness due to absence of representation in the Unified Command and delays in distributing results of site investigations.