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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: MIAMI HERALD GETS IT WRONG ON NOTIFICATION OF RESIDENTS



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Tallahassee, Fla.— Today, the Miami Herald published a misleading and inaccurate article stating that the Department has not been forthcoming about well water testing results in North Marion County, in the Lowell area. The Herald asserts that DOH should have notified homeowners regarding test results that were not yet complete. After testing was completed, affected homeowners were immediately notified. Also, a press release was issued last month regarding this issue. DOH worked quickly to notify the public and to obtain the proper permission to test private wells. Only five private wells tested positive for an exceedance of PFOAS and PFOA.

“The Department’s ongoing efforts to sample private wells, inform well owners and ensure safe drinking water across the state is a crucial part of our mission,” said State Surgeon General and Secretary Dr. Celeste Philip. “Unfortunately, the Miami Herald has failed to accurately capture our long-standing and established sampling and reporting procedures and we hope to clear up any misconceptions about our ongoing efforts in the Ocala community. **At no time did the Department delay notification to residents about any well sampling results.**”

In September 2018, the Florida Department of Health in Marion County (DOH-Marion) was informed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) that a private drinking water well at the Florida State Fire College tested positive for PFOS and PFOA, two chemicals designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as “contaminants of emerging concern.” This sampling was part of ongoing assessment efforts between DEP and DOH to further evaluate the extent of any potential groundwater impacts in the area, inform area residents and restore water quality.

The Department will continue to collaborate with local, state and national partners to learn more about these chemicals and its potential health impacts. Because the health and safety of the faculty and students of the Florida State Fire College as well as residents in the surrounding area is our top priority the Department will set the record straight:

CLAIM: “It took about four months for state health officials to notify Lawson and others in the community about potentially elevated levels of the chemicals.”

FACTS:

- **Results for the Florida State Fire College sampling were known in September, after which the department immediately notified the college. The Department of Financial Services' Division of State Fire Marshal then [notified](#) all staff.**
- **Private drinking water wells were part of a subsequent round of sampling and these results were not known until November. The Department cannot notify homeowners of testing results that are not complete. This should have been made clear in the Herald's article.**
- On September 28, 2018, the Department received sampling kits that were ordered from the lab to sample drinking water wells. **Because the study of PFOS and PFOA are still new, special kits must be ordered from a lab that has equipment capable of analyzing PFAS. These kits take a few weeks to arrive. Kits are sent to California for processing.**
- During the first week of October the Department conducted sampling from private drinking water wells in the area.
- On November 2, certified test results for the first round of sampling that occurred in the first week of October were given to the Department. Once the Department received certified results it immediately began drafting letters to notify residents their wells had results above the Health Advisory Level.
- On November 5, the next business day, letters were **hand delivered** in person to residents whose drinking water wells had results above the Health Advisory Level.

CLAIM: "In September state health officials began discussing means of informing the Fire College, but it wasn't until late October that they discussed notifying the rest of the nearby community."

FACTS:

- Since receiving the results, the Department has remained in constant communication with the Fire College and actively contacting residents in the area.
- **Prior to any sampling, the Department must receive permission to sample private drinking water wells from private homes, businesses and institutions. After identifying which private wells should be sampled, the Department immediately began contacting well owners through in-person visits and doorhangers for residents and owners who were not available at the time.**
- The Department continues its efforts to reach private well owners. On December 19, DOH-Marion sent out a [press release](#) encouraging residents to participate in the ongoing private well sampling efforts.
- While a total of 90 private drinking water wells were identified for sampling, the Department was awaiting permission to conduct sampling at 46 private residences in the community. Some have declined sampling.

CLAIM: "Of the 80 to 90 wells in a mile radius around the college, 17 wells were tested."

FACTS:

- This is wrong. The Department has sampled 44 wells. The Department was only able to sample wells on properties of private residences after receiving permission from the owner of those residences.
- Including the Fire College, nine wells have shown exceedances for PFOS/PFOA.
- Of those showing exceedances, the Department is actively aiding the homeowners in remediation.

INACCURATE REPORTING ON ALTERNATIVE WATER SUPPLIES

The Herald inaccurately reported that the Department's employees were to instruct residents not to utilize an alternative water supply. The Department has public health professionals who live in the area and faithfully serve their community and care about its residents. Residents were informed that if they preferred, they could choose to use an alternative water supply for drinking, cooking or brushing teeth while they waited for their results to be received.

INACCURATE REPORTING ON THE OPEN HOUSE

While the Herald reported that an Open House was rescheduled due to Hurricane Michael, it failed to report that the department continuously provided information and answered questions on conference calls beginning in September. The Open House was one additional method the department used to provide information.

BELOW IS A FULL TIMELINE OF SAMPLING ACTIVITIES

Date	Action
September 6, 2018	DEP contacts Florida Department of Health (FDOH) and the Florida State Fire College with certified sampling results they collected from the College.
September 9, 2018	Supplies of bottled water were made available by the DEP's Water Supply Restoration Program on September 9, 2018. The Fire College will continue to have access to an alternative water supply until water Quality has been restored.
September 10, 2018	Additional planning conference calls were held to refine sampling plans. Participants included multiple personnel from the Fire College, Florida Department of Financial Services (DFS), FDOH employees from the Central Office and local county health department, and DEP.
September 12, 2018	FDOH staff visit the Fire College cafeteria to further inform the kitchen manager and staff and ensure that an alternative water source was being used for food preparation.
September 13, 2018	The Fire College informs its faculty, students and stakeholders of initial sampling results and provided information from DEP and FDOH prior to the scheduled open house.
September 13, 2018	FDOH ordered sampling kits to conduct sampling of drinking water wells.
September 28, 2018	FDOH received sampling kits that were ordered from the lab to sample drinking water wells. Because the study of PFOS and PFOA are still new, special kits have to be ordered from a lab that has equipment capable of analyzing PFAS.
October 2-3, 2018	FDOH conducts sampling from drinking water wells in the area.
October 16, 2018	Open House scheduled with DEP and Fire College. Rescheduled due to Hurricane Michael.
Ongoing	FDOH and DEP remain in constant communication with the Fire College to ensure faculty and students remain informed and continue to have access to an alternative drinking water supply

	until water quality is restored through the modification of the existing well and installation of a filtration system.
November 2, 2018	The certified results for the first round of sampling that occurred in the first week of October were given to the Department (FDOH) on November 2, 2018.
November 5, 2018	Letters were delivered in person to residents whose drinking water wells had results above the Health Advisory level.
December 4, 2018	Open house was held with DEP and the Fire College to allow staff and trainees to learn more about the ongoing groundwater study.
December 4-present	An additional 24 wells have been sampled with pending results. To date, FDOH has made contact with nearly 90 people regarding sampling. This includes collecting 40 samples from 37 properties and attempting to arrange sampling for an additional 46. FDOH and DEP will continue to sample areas of concern, educate the public and work on long-term mitigation strategies.

Click [here](#) for more information on PFOS and PFOA and potential health effects.

About the Florida Department of Health

The department, nationally accredited by the [Public Health Accreditation Board](#), works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

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