

# City of Weslaco

*"The City on the Grow"*



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Lupe V. Rivera, Commissioner, District 5  
Joe A. Martinez, Commissioner, District 6

Leonardo Olivares, City Manager

## Press Release

**For Immediate Release:**

May 22, 2012

**Contact:**

David Salinas, Public Utilities Director  
956.973.3146

### **Unconfirmed Release of Chlorite at Water Plant** *Water Still Meets State & Federal Regulations*

Weslaco, TX -- On April 21, the City's Water Treatment Plant operators, OMI, detected and reported chlorite levels exceeding the maximum amount permitted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Although the follow-up test to confirm the release should have been conducted within 24 hours, it was conducted within 48 hours and showed chlorite levels meeting EPA requirements.

"The potential health risk was serious," said Leonardo Olivares, City Manager. "Our operators are being held accountable and have accepted full responsibility. They have taken quick and definite steps to ensure this does not happen again."

Chlorite salt is found in drinking water plants in the Rio Grande Valley that use chlorine dioxide to disinfect water from the river. Chlorite is monitored daily. The unconfirmed release was not an immediate risk to the public; otherwise customers would have been notified immediately.

"The risk to the public was minimal," said David Salinas, PUD Director. "We can't confirm that the initial reading was correct. Chlorite levels may have been acceptable. Even if chlorite was released, it dissipates quickly and so probably never left the plant. Furthermore, all our daily chlorite tests have consistently met EPA's standards."

The water supply continues to meet state and federal regulations. There is no need to use an alternative water supply.

For more information on OMI, Inc., visit their website: [www.omi.ch2mhill.com/index.htm](http://www.omi.ch2mhill.com/index.htm).

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## **Unconfirmed Chlorite Release at Water Plant**

May 21, 2012

### **Who is OMI?**

The City of Weslaco has partnered with OMI to provide water treatment, wastewater treatment and lift station maintenance of its public utilities since October 1993. OMI facilities management group provides multidisciplinary services focused on operations of plant assets as well as a custom tailored operations and maintenance solutions including water and wastewater system optimization. OMI staff is responsible for the complete management, operations and maintenance of the water and wastewater facilities for the City. OMI trains and hires its own staff to provide these services. Only water distribution and wastewater collection is handled directly by the City's Public Utilities Department (PUD).

### **What is chlorite?**

Chlorite is a required precursor and by product of the chlorine dioxide disinfection process for treating surface water (rivers, lakes, streams) and remains in drinking water as a salt. Chlorite salt is found in drinking water plants in the Rio Grande Valley that use chlorine dioxide to disinfect water from the river, and it is routinely monitored.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has determined that chlorite salt may pose a health concern at levels above a Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) of 1.0 mg/L. For example:

- Some infants and young children could experience nervous system effects.
- Similar effects may occur in fetuses of pregnant women.
- Some people may experience anemia.

### **What happened?**

On Saturday, April 21, 2012, OMI staff at the water treatment plant detected a chlorite reading of 1.1 mg/L exceeding the maximum containment level of 1.0 mg/L. Unfortunately, OMI plant staff was required to resample the water within 24 hours, but were unable to do so because a lack of lab supplies and misinterpretation of regulations. Consequently, they were unable to definitively confirm whether or not customers had actually received any drinking water containing an excess chlorite level. When the resample was taken on April 24, 2012, chlorite levels were found to be well below acceptable levels.

The unconfirmed excess level resulted from a mechanical malfunction. The mechanical failure was a vacuum leak in the generator which caused a false reading for chlorine feed rate. This caused an inadequate amount of chlorine gas to be fed to convert the sodium chlorite to chlorine dioxide.

It is important to note that staff could not confirm any detection of the chlorite above 1.0 mg/L in the water provided to your homes or businesses.

### **What preventive actions have been taken?**

The following corrective actions have been taken by OMI:

1. This mechanical malfunction of the generator has been corrected.
2. OMI's chlorite provider and laboratory has agreed to provide additional sample bottles in the event that repeat sampling is required on weekends.
3. OMI has expanded its operating procedures to provide additional training and safeguards during water sample analysis.

### **What are the chlorite levels at this time?**

All subsequent sampling of the drinking water confirms that the chlorite level has been in compliance with MCL requirements at or below a maximum level (1.0 mg/L).

You do not need to use an alternative water supply. However, if you have health concerns, you may want to talk to your doctor to get more information about how this may affect you.

For more information on OMI, Inc. please visit their website at [www.omi.ch2mhill.com/index.htm](http://www.omi.ch2mhill.com/index.htm).

**Mandatory Public Notification Language**

**Notice of Drinking Water CHLORITE Violation and  
Notice of a Routine Monitoring Violation for Chlorite**

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) has notified the City of Weslaco water system that the drinking water being supplied to customers had exceeded the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) for CHLORITE. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) has established the MCL for CHLORITE at 1 mg/L, and has determined that it is a health concern at levels above the MCL. Analysis of drinking water in your community for CHLORITE indicates a level of 1.1 mg/L.

Some infants and young children who drink water containing chlorite in excess of the MCL could experience nervous system effects. Similar effects may occur in fetuses of pregnant women who drink water containing chlorite in excess of the MCL. Some people may experience anemia. You do not need to use an alternative water supply. However, if you have health concerns, you may want to talk to your doctor to get more information about how this may affect you.

In addition to the above, **City of Weslaco Water System** failed to collect the required daily samples for chlorite monitoring of the water entering the distribution system on **April 21, 2012**. This monitoring is required by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's "Drinking Water Standards" and the federal "Safe Drinking Water Act," Public Law 95 523. Failure to monitor or monitoring inadequately makes it impossible to know if there is chlorite in excess of the maximum contaminant level (MCL) requirement of 1.0 mg/l (ppm). Our water system is required to take one sample each day of the water entering the distribution system. Failure to collect all required chlorite samples is a violation of the monitoring requirements and we are required to notify you of this violation.

If you have any questions regarding this violation, you may contact **David Salinas, Public Utilities Director**, at (956) 973-3146.

**Our water treatment plant operators did not have the required sample bottles and preservatives to take the three required samples on Saturday, April 21, 2012. We coordinated with our contract laboratory and collected the samples on April 24, 2012. The results from the samples taken on April 24, 2012 indicated that the water was in compliance with MCL requirements for chlorite. At our request, our laboratory has agreed to provide additional sample bottles in the event that repeat sampling is required on weekends.**

**Corrective actions have been taken to prevent similar recurrences in the future.**