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State Health Officer Provides Food Safety Reminders Following Flooding

CHARLESTON, W.Va. – The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau for Public Health is urging residents to use caution when using food following power outages or after being exposed to flood waters.

“It is important for residents who lost electrical power and were without a back-up generator to dispose of any perishable food items to help eliminate the possibility of food contamination,” said Dr. Rahul Gupta, State Health Officer and Commissioner for the Bureau for Public Health. “The use of potentially contaminated food, household products, medicines and cosmetics that have been exposed to flood waters may pose a threat to your health.”

The following may serve as a guide for food supply that has been exposed to flood water:

- All fresh fruits and vegetables, including home garden produce, should be destroyed.
- Foods such as cereals, bakery goods, dried fruits, flour, frozen foods, sugar, salt and similar foods in paper or plastic containers or wrapping should be destroyed.
- All meats, including fresh, dried, frozen and home canned should be destroyed.

At your own risk, you may salvage commercially canned foods using the following method: foods in hermetically sealed containers that remain airtight (free from severe dents, split seams or leaks) may be salvaged by removing the labels, washing the containers in water containing a detergent, rinsing in clear water, and submerging in a solution containing laundry bleach. Two (2) tablespoons of laundry bleach per one (1) gallon of water should be prepared frequently during the washing process. The food containers should be rinsed in cool water from a safe source. Re-label the containers as to contents for future use.

Foods, household products, medicines and cosmetics in containers with screw caps should be destroyed. Refrigerated food should be safe as long as the power was out for no more than 4 hours and the refrigerator door was kept shut.

Foods that have thawed or partially thawed should be destroyed; however, frozen foods that have remained in a closed freezer and have not been exposed to flood water or other contamination may be safe for use provided the time without refrigeration does not exceed 24 hours.

“Foodborne illness can be serious and poses significant health risks,” said Gupta. “In addition to individuals and families, supermarkets, convenience stores and restaurant owners need to be cautious. When in doubt, throw it out.”

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