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Water Environment Federation Panel Finds Low Risk of Coronavirus for Wastewater Workers, Updates Guidelines for Safety

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – A blue-ribbon panel of experts convened by the Water Environment Federation to evaluate safety of wastewater workers during the coronavirus pandemic concluded that occupational risk of infection is low, standard wastewater treatment processes inactivate the virus, and additional research should be conducted to further increase understanding of hazards and protections for personnel.

The panel also updated the guidelines for protection of wastewater personnel from potential pathways of exposure to biological hazards, including coronavirus.

"While new information continues to emerge on COVID-19, the important work of the Water Environment Federation's blue-ribbon panel should serve to reassure wastewater workers that they can protect their health by following the appropriate safety protocols and being strict about the use of personal protective equipment," says WEF Chief Medical Officer Dr. Andrew Sanderson.

The panel was comprised of experts involved in water operations, science, health, and safety and its report was provided to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

"The top priority of the Water Environment Federation is always to ensure the safety and health of our frontline people, who are essential workers in communities across the country," said WEF President Jackie Jarrell. "We are grateful to the blue-ribbon panel for ensuring that information on hazards and safety are based on the latest evidence and best science."

The panel found that best practices for protecting the health of workers exposed to wastewater should be followed, such as engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices, and personal protective equipment (PPE) normally required for tasks when handling untreated wastewater. At locations where wastewater or sludge is sprayed, the possibility of inhaling potentially infectious agents will increase and use of surgical masks, or their equivalent, and goggles may help to minimize contact.

The panel also found that because of direct high exposure to untreated wastewater, collections system workers have greater risks of infection from pathogens. Furthermore, wastewater personnel engaged in biosolids handling, laboratory analytics, septic haulers, landfill leachate handlers, industrial pretreatment personnel, and persons handling ambient water quality sampling all have potential exposure. But risks of coronavirus are considered low because the virus has not yet been detected in wastewater in its infectious form.

The panel's work resulted in updates to the WEF Manual of Practice, *Safety, Health and Security in Wastewater Systems*, specifically to the chapter that discusses types of hazards, how to prevent and treat infections, and which workers are at risk.

The blue-ribbon panel recommended research to further increase understanding of hazards and protections for water personnel. This includes conducting epidemiological studies of the incidence of infectious diseases among wastewater workers, with further analyses of PPE use and effectiveness. It is also recommended a study to evaluate respiratory exposure for tasks performed by workers in wastewater collection and treatment. This is particularly relevant to aerosolization of wastewater whereby exposure to potentially infectious agents via aerosols may be possible. However, much remains unknown about the role aerosols have in infectious virus transmission, specifically coronavirus.

“This important and timely work of this highly credible blue-ribbon panel provides necessary and appropriate guidance to our wastewater industry on protecting against COVID-19 infection,” says Dr. Art Umble, Senior Vice President of Global Wastewater Treatment Sector Leader at Stantec Consulting Services and chair of the panel. “More importantly, it provides a powerful reminder to us all that vigilance to protection from all potential hazards exposure when working in a wastewater environment is crucial. It requires we not only continue exercising those best practices we would normally take against potential exposure to any pathogen, but now an even stronger commitment to these practices is imperative.”

WEF's overall response to the coronavirus pandemic has included providing the latest technical and scientific information to the water community, offering educational opportunities through digital programming, communicating regularly about resources and assistance available to the sector, and promoting the essential nature of water workers. WEF maintains comprehensive information and resources related to coronavirus at www.wef.org/coronavirus

For more information visit <https://www.wef.org/blue-ribbon-panel/>

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About WEF

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