

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Editorial

Whether publicly or privately operated, utilities have the highest duty of service and trust to their customers. The commodities they provide, from power to sanitation to water, are vital to public health and safety.

Nearly 5,000 Paradise Valley and Scottsdale customers of a private water company endured the second incident in three months in which elevated levels of the solvent trichloroethylene, a suspected cancer-causing chemical, was found in their drinking water system. That should be cause for a detailed, reliable examination of how well the company is able to detect such substances, prevent them from reaching taps and to quickly inform all customers.

Moreover, while Arizona American Water Co. used a "reverse 911" system to quickly inform customers this week to avoid tap water until TCE levels subsided to safe levels, a company spokesman told the Tribune's Ari Cohn that the system is only able to reach 65 percent of them.

And as Cohn reported Friday, already U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., followed up Thursday on a November letter to the federal Environmental Protection Agency with another one expressing that he is "seriously concerned with the failure to protect against the emission of trichloroethylene" into those customers' drinking water supply.

In November's letter, Mitchell had questioned why the EPA had waited until weeks after TCE was discovered at the Miller Road plant to inform residents.

It's clear that the EPA needs to give this situation more attention. And Arizona American Water Co. needs to come up with a more reliable way to detect substances such as TCE in water being treated for drinking.

As Cohn reported, a mechanical failure allowed tainted water to continue to be processed Wednesday morning before a technician discovered it. A system designed to alert plant employees of equipment breakdowns failed, Cohn wrote.

This week's incident led to disruptions for not only residents but for businesses, particularly restaurants, which were notably inconvenienced by having to use bottled water.

For the past two days, media reports showed lines of vehicles pulling into the water company's headquarters and Paradise Valley Town Hall to receive free bottled water from Arizona American.

This shouldn't have to happen. No hurricane struck here. Residents and merchants have the right to expect clean, safe water at all times and the security of knowing that systems are in

place with sufficient backup to prevent anything that should not be in their water from ever showing up there.