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Investigators: Operator error led to Spencer water contamination

By **Associated Press**
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WORCESTER - State officials said workers and a faulty alarm system are to blame for an excess of lye that was released into Spencer's public water supply last week, leading about 100 people to seek medical treatment.

Lye, or sodium hydroxide, is regularly added to the water to help maintain a proper balance of acidity.

But Martin Suuberg, a regional director for the state Department of Environmental Protection, said a system that dilutes the chemical was switched from automatic to manual while a leak was being repaired at the town's water treatment plant.

Suuberg said two workers failed to switch the system back to automatic, and 34 gallons of undiluted lye went into the water. The operators have been reassigned by the town and temporarily replaced by a private contractor.

The DEP's findings were released Wednesday in a preliminary report, but Suuberg said the investigation is continuing.

About 100 residents suffered minor burns or skin rashes from the contamination.

The chemical release triggered alarms, but Suuberg said a system that should have alerted other operators to the problem was apparently not working.

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