

INCIDENT: Fire Foam Contaminates Water Supply
LOCATION: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
SOURCE: Pittsburgh Tribune Review
DATE OF INCIDENT: 3/1/2008

"Fire trucks' water pressure overwhelmed the city's drinking supply lines and pushed fire-suppression foam into them as firefighters tried to extinguish a burning Strip District warehouse, Pittsburgh's director of public safety said Wednesday. Two pumper trucks were connected to fire hydrants for a long time Tuesday afternoon, said Public Safety Director Mike Huss, and as the pressure built up in the truck lines, it overwhelmed the drinking water lines' force. "It's highly unusual, and we're surprised that it did it," (backpressure backflow) Huss said. The Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority advised people Downtown and in the Strip District not to use water for a few hours into yesterday morning, until the foam could be flushed from the system. Ingesting less than an ounce of the biodegradable foam wouldn't pose a health threat, but it can irritate skin and eyes, said Bob Hutton, a project coordinator for the authority. Callers began complaining about soapy-looking water Tuesday afternoon. Firefighters allowed the four-alarm fire, which started Tuesday morning in the former Otto Milk Co. complex at 25th and Smallman streets, to burn overnight because of difficulties extinguishing it in cork- and foam-insulated walls. The building continued smoldering yesterday. Fire Chief Darryl Jones said he had not seen the foam problem in the 20 years he has fought fires. "We are going to make some adjustments to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said. The fire apparently started when a construction crew's cutting torch ignited insulation in the building, the construction crew manager said."