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Drilling project sends mud into Little Cahaba

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An Alagasco project accidentally released drilling mud into the Little **Cahaba** River, but it had no toxic impact, the company said Wednesday.

Myra Crawford of the environmental **Cahaba Riverkeeper** went to the Little **Cahaba** River in Leeds on Monday, where the drilling project had accidentally released drilling mud.

"I saw in the middle of the river, which was 2 to 2 1/2 feet deep, a greenish, gray-white area," she said. The Little **Cahaba**, and the larger **Cahaba** River into which it flows, are a major source of drinking water for the Birmingham area.

The discoloration first appeared Saturday, but wasn't reported until Monday, said Alagasco spokeswoman Susan Delenne, who said the mud had leaked from drilling a new gas pipeline underneath the river.

Alagasco quickly sent Highland Technical Services, a Birmingham environmental and geosciences consultant, to the site to add additional expertise to the daily environmental monitoring done by Magnolia River Services, said Danny Smith, director of environmental services for Alagasco.

"Anything like this, whether it is minor or significant, we take very seriously," he said. Highland Technical examined the release, and found there was been no impact, Smith said. "In an abundance of caution" the company also put up a turbidity screen downstream from the leak.

The Little **Cahaba** is the headwaters for Lake Purdy, the Birmingham Water Works' seasonal reservoir that sits on the line between Jefferson and Shelby counties. Just downstream of Lake Purdy, the river flows into the **Cahaba** River, just above the intake pipes for the Shades Mountain Filtration Plant.

Alagasco has been drilling a 10-inch diameter hole horizontally about 25 feet below the Little **Cahaba**, Smith said, for a new gas line to the Lehigh Cement Co.

Drillers use lubricating clay as they work: The clay helps to slip a 10-inch sleeve into the bore hole, its pressure keeps the bore from collapsing and the clay helps float rock cuttings back away from the drill head, Smith said.

When the drilling is complete, a 6-inch gas line will be placed inside the 10-inch sleeve, Smith said.

Crawford said that she took a sample of the drilling clay from the middle of the river and will have it tested for possible toxicity.

"We speculate, but cannot prove, that they may have hit a pocket when they were drilling and it kind of erupted downstream," she said. She said some neighbors had seen a small plume of discoloration at the site on Saturday and Monday.

Crawford is the "**riverkeeper**" for the **Cahaba Riverkeeper** nonprofit group.

A **riverkeeper** is a person who works full-time to help watch, protect and advocate for the watershed of a river.

The **Cahaba Riverkeeper** is part of the Waterkeeper Alliance, which covers programs across North America. Besides riverkeepers, the alliance also has lakekeepers and baykeepers.