PFAS in Our Water

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS, or forever chemicals) are a group of toxic, lab-made, and long-living compounds introduced by chemical corporations beginning in the 1940s and used in consumer products from nonstick pans to rain gear to cosmetics. Corporations long hid evidence of PFAS toxicity and environmental contamination, but recent research links PFAS exposure to health issues including neurological impairment, developmental impacts, and reproductive harm.[1] Efforts led by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to test for 29 PFAS in public drinking water systems are underway, with preliminary data suggesting that up to 60 percent of the U.S. population may be exposed.[2]

Studies link elevated PFAS levels with proximity to PFAS industrial facilities and disposal sites, and to discharge sites for PFAS firefighting foam (e.g., military bases and airports).[3] Using bottled water is not the solution to avoiding PFAS, since most contains tap water anyway and has also been found to contain PFAS.[4]

Public water systems serving communities of color are associated with having more sources of PFAS contamination, reflecting historical disparities in the siting of toxic facilities. These systems are also more likely to have PFAS concentrations above state-level standards.[5] Communities of color bear the health and economic burdens generated by PFAS corporations and the lack of polluter-pay liability.[6]

Current PFAS Regulations Do Not Go Far Enough

In January 2024, the EPA finalized a rule that prevents companies from starting or resuming the production of 329 “old” PFAS. The EPA also added seven PFAS to the Toxics Release Inventory and developed additional testing methods for PFAS in the environment and waste. In February 2024, the EPA proposed designating nine PFAS as hazardous under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act.[7] The Biden administration also announced at least $1 billion in funding for cleaning up PFAS pollution in water across the nation.[8] However, more robust regulations are needed to tackle the entire class of PFAS and to hold PFAS companies responsible for funding clean-up.[9]

In April 2024, the EPA finalized Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) limits for two PFAS in public drinking water systems, and a hazard index to regulate another four, including GenX.[10] These MCL limits do not apply to private wells, used by 17 percent of U.S. households.[11] This may increase economic and health disparities; for example, in North Carolina, white, affluent well owners are ten times more likely than people of color to test their wells and four times more likely to treat them.[12]

The EPA estimates that it will cost public water systems between $764 million and $1.2 billion annually over the next 80 years to comply with the proposed drinking water limits for six PFAS,[13]

info@fwwatch.org
202.683.2500 (DC)
510.922.0720 (CA)
foodandwaterwatch.org

while third-party estimates are substantially higher.[14] This burden will ultimately be shifted to households in the form of higher rates[15] and does not even include health-related costs from PFAS exposure, estimated between $5.5 billion and $63 billion annually in the U.S.[16] These are monumental costs for any community, especially the vulnerable households disproportionally located near PFAS sources.[17]

Support the PFAS Action Act

Toxic PFAS "forever" chemicals have penetrated almost every aspect of our lives, and especially our water. We need to push Congress to pass the PFAS Action Act to speed up regulations and provide legal clarity to get PFAS out of our water and hold polluters accountable. **We have waited too long and cannot wait any longer; every community deserves safe, clean water.**

Endnotes

1 See Food & Water Watch (FWW). "PFAS and the Chemistry of Concealment." November 2023.

2 Perkins, Tom. "At least 60% of the US population may face 'forever chemicals' in tap water, tests suggest." *Guardian.* February 20, 2024; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). [Fact sheet]. "The Fifth Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule (UCMR 5) Data Summary: January 2024." January 2024 at 1.

3 Salvatore, Derrick et al. "Presumptive contamination: A new approach to PFAS contamination based on likely sources." *Environmental Science Technology Letters.* Vol. 9. 2022 at abstract and 984 to 985.

4 Lazarus, David. "You do know that, in most cases, bottled water is just tap water?" *Los Angeles Times*. September 28, 2021; Chow, Steven J. et al. "Detection of ultrashort-chain and other per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in U.S. bottled water." *Water Research.* Vol. 201. August 2021 at abstract.

5 Liddie, Jahred M. et al. "Sociodemographic factors are associated with the abundance of PFAS sources and detection in U.S. community water systems." *Environmental Science & Technology.* Vol. 57. 2023 at abstract and 7905 to 7908.

6 Cordner, Alissa. "The true cost of PFAS and the benefits of acting now." *Environmental Science & Technology.* Vol. 55. 2021 at 9631.

7 EPA. "Key EPA actions to address PFAS." Updated February 6, 2024. Available at https://www.epa.gov/pfas/key-epa-actions-address-pfas. Accessed February 2024.

8 White House. [Press release]. "Biden-Harris administration announces nearly $6 billion for clean drinking water and wastewater infrastructure as part of Investing in America tour." February 20, 2024.

9 Gaber, Nadia et al. "The devil they knew: Chemical documents analysis of industry influence on PFAS science." *Annals of Global Health.* Vol. 89. June 2023 at 6 and 11.

10 EPA. [Press release]. "Biden-Harris Administration finalizes first-ever national drinking water standard to protect 100M people from PFAS pollution." April 10, 2024.

11 Murray, Andrew et al. "Methods for estimating locations of housing units served by private domestic wells in the United States applied to 2010." *Journal of the American Water Resources Association.* Vol. 57, Iss. 5. October 2021 at abstract.

12 University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Institute for the Environment. "New UNC study identifies disparities in testing and treating well water among low-income, BIPOC households in N.C." July 31, 2023.

13 EPA. "Economic Analysis for the Proposed Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances National Primary Drinking Water Regulation." EPA-882-P-23-001. March 2023 at 2-3 and 5-3.

14 Black & Veatch. Prepared for the American Water Works Association. "WITAF 56 Technical Memorandum PFAS National Cost Model Report." Docket No. 409850. March 7, 2023 at 31 to 32 and A-1.

15 Fitchwire. "US water utilities' debt would increase under proposed PFAS rule." *FitchRatings.* April 3, 2023; Jordan, David. "Utilities see new costs in proposed PFAS water rule." *Roll Call.* March 22, 2023.

16 Obsekov, Vladislav et al. "Leveraging systematic reviews to explore disease burden costs and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substance exposures in the United States." *Exposure and Health.* Vol. 15. July 2022 at abstract, 3 to 4, and 17 to 18.

17 Liddie et al. (2023) at abstract.