



PADEP TO SET OWN LIMITS ON PFAS IN WATER

Pennsylvania will work to create its own regulations for chemicals that have seeped into drinking water in nearly two dozen towns in Bucks and Montgomery Counties, and will test about 360 drinking water systems across the state to determine whether the contamination is more widespread than is known, state officials said.

"Our approach on this had been wanting to see action at the federal level," Patrick McDonnell, secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, said Monday before meeting with residents at Abington Senior High School. "But the place we are today is that we don't want to wait anymore."

But those regulations - long requested by residents worried about their water and their health - could take at least a few years to come to fruition.

Many of the dozens of residents who gathered for Monday's public meeting voiced frustration with the state's response and the slow pace of the bureaucratic process.

"We just want speed, we want urgency, and we want results," Gregory Nesbitt, president of the Horsham Township Council, told state officials. His remarks drew applause from the audience.

Pennsylvania's steps to deal with drinking water contaminated by PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, come as several other states are in the process of regulating the chemicals. New Jersey unveiled a proposal this month for regulations for two PFAS chemicals that would set one of the most stringent enforceable limits in the country.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced in February that it will work toward a nationwide drinking water limit for types of PFAS, but that process will take years and has been criticized by some activists as not moving quickly enough.

PFAS were in firefighting foams used for decades on military bases in Willow Grove and Warminster. At least 22 towns in Bucks and Montgomery Counties have some level of contamination in their drinking water from PFAS. The chemicals are also found in everyday items such as nonstick cookware and pizza boxes, and have been linked to cancer, reproductive issues, and other health problems.

Residents of Horsham, Warrington, and Warminster have been dealing with water contamination for years, and blood tests found that residents of those towns had elevated levels of PFAS in their blood compared with the general U.S. population.

To determine how many other Pennsylvania communities may be affected, officials will test about 360 drinking water systems across the state, said Lisa Daniels, director of the state's Bureau of Safe Drinking Water. Those systems were selected for their proximity to military bases, fire training schools, airports, landfills, and manufacturing facilities where PFAS could have seeped into soil and water.

The first phase of testing could begin as early as May and will "really help us figure out how big of a problem we might have in Pennsylvania," Daniels said.

Chris Crockett, chief environmental officer for Aqua Pennsylvania, which supplies water to several towns in Southeastern Pennsylvania, urged officials to sample every water system in the state, not just those closest to

potential sources of contamination.

"There is no simple and accurate way to determine a vulnerable system," Crockett said. "All systems statewide need sampling."

Rick Rogers, associate director of drinking water and source water protection at the EPA, told residents at Monday's meeting that the agency intends to move forward with a federal maximum contaminant level for PFAS and would make an official determination to move forward in 2020. After that, it "would take another several years of input and process" before regulations were final, Rogers said.

Pennsylvania has never set its own state maximum contaminant level for a substance in drinking water, McDonnell said. The state is working to hire a toxicologist to advise the state on this process by reviewing scientific research and other states' regulations. The sampling plan results will also affect the regulations, McDonnell said.

"The regulatory process itself, once we have those data sets, is typically around two years," he said. "We're hoping we can do it more quickly than that, but that's the benchmark we would look at."

(By Laura McCrystal - Philadelphia Inquirer)



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