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U.S. government's \$650 billion buying power could move markets to PFAS-free products



Curbing the needless use of the toxic "**forever chemicals**" known as PFAS could end their cycle of contamination, and the U.S. government has an extraordinary ability to move markets to PFAS-free products with its \$650 billion annual purchasing power.

The government is the world's largest buyer of goods and services, everything from textiles to cookware – everyday products found in households across the country. Many of these items contain PFAS, and making them pollutes the air and water, which creates health risks when people are exposed to that pollution. By using its massive procurement power to purchase sustainable products that are free of these chemicals, the government can send a strong signal to the market that it needs to shift to PFAS-free products.

Ending non-essential government purchases of products containing PFAS would encourage the development of safer products and reward companies for eliminating the chemicals altogether. That could help to end the extremely harmful **waste cycle** of PFAS, which are known as forever chemicals because they do not break down and they can build up in our blood and organs, causing a litany of potential health harms.

And the Biden administration has the power to act now – without conducting new studies on PFAS risks, proposing new regulations or obtaining new legal authorities.

How to promote safer alternatives?

PFAS are often added to everyday products found in homes, offices, hospitals, schools, and more, including stain-resistant carpeting and upholstery, water-resistant clothing, nonstick cookware and food containers.

The government spends enormous amounts on these products. In 2021, it **bought** \$1.1 billion in special purpose clothing, \$831 million in furniture, \$128 million in textile fabrics and \$48 million in products for cooking, baking and serving food.

Many of these products likely contain PFAS, and there's no system that encourages buying safer substitutes. If the United States targeted part of its \$650 billion purse at PFAS-free products, it would stimulate a shift in

markets that would reduce production of these chemicals, in turn curbing PFAS air and water pollution from manufacturing facilities.

Exposure to PFAS pollution increases the **risk of cancer**, **harms the development of the fetus** and **reduces the effectiveness of vaccines**. Studies by the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** show the blood of nearly all Americans is contaminated with PFAS.

Despite **documented health concerns**, PFAS compounds remain largely unregulated, and federal controls to protect air and water could take years to develop.

Getting the GSA to take action

In December 2021, President Joe Biden **directed** the government to focus its purchasing power on PFAS-free products. But **the policy** can achieve very little without action by the General Services Administration, or GSA, which sets ground rules for federal purchasing.

PFAS-free products are **available**, and more companies are committing to making and marketing them. **Home Depot** is phasing PFAS out of carpets and rugs. **Lowe's** policy restricts them in “all indoor residential carpet and rugs” and “all fabric protection sprays.” **Ikea** has banned PFAS in textiles and other products. (Here is a list of **PFAS-free products**.)

Twenty-three organizations, including EWG, recently **recommended** ways the GSA could drive government purchasing toward these types of PFAS-free products.

Sustainability-focused businesses also want to see action. Many are ready to **market** more environmentally friendly products to the government – even occasionally taking the lead in this effort – but run into obstacles and red tape. Several of these companies have suggested **specific actions** that would open the federal market to PFAS-free products.

The GSA can help speed up the removal of PFAS from the environment by:

- Banning PFAS-contaminated products through contracts with suppliers
- Making sustainability-centered purchasing a top tier strategic priority

- Conducting “spot checks” to confirm that products bought by the government are free of added PFAS
- Reviewing all federal purchasing policies for consistency with Biden’s directive
- Mandating the use of the Environmental Protection Agency’s recommendations for environmentally preferable purchasing.

Finally, the Biden administration should require all federal agencies to report annually on their progress toward the target of buying PFAS-free products.

Meeting this goal is a straightforward, immediate and powerful way to begin moving markets toward safer consumer products and jumpstart an end to the PFAS waste cycle.