

EPA Has Miscalculated a Major Water Pollution Problem

By **Daniel Rickenmann, Deborah Robertson, Christina Muryn, and Steve Williams**
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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is racing to place **new limits on certain Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS)** in water systems. However, in their unwavering haste, they ignore the science, the available data, and the Americans in our communities who will shoulder the massive costs. The EPA must hit the brakes on these regulations and fast.

PFAS are a vast group of man-made chemicals that break down exceptionally slowly because they are resistant to heat, water, and oil. PFAS chemicals have been used for decades for various industrial and consumer products, including upholstery, electronics, metal plating, etc. The two chemicals the EPA is preparing to regulate are perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS), and they are no longer produced in the United States. However, they have recently been a topic of public concern, especially in regards to drinking water contamination. The historic widespread use of PFOA and PFOS, combined with their incredibly resilient structure, has caused them to linger at low levels in the environment and in the American population's blood system.

The EPA estimates that drinking water may only account for **20 percent** of the PFOA/PFOS exposure. While some studies suggest PFAS chemicals are everywhere and that some can lead to increased health risks, many scientists claim the science is uncertain. However, the EPA proposes a new maximum contaminant level (MCL) for these PFAS compounds to be **four parts per trillion**, the lowest level of reliable detection. For reference, with that limit, an individual would have to drink 2.5 liters of water daily for seventy years with PFAS chemicals found at that MCL level to experience possible detrimental effects due to long-term exposure.

These are historically low levels of detection. Plus, the health benefits of limiting PFOA/PFOS to these levels are still being studied and are widely considered uncertain. However, the costs of implementing new levels of

PFAS removal are better known. The EPA's estimated annual price tag to meet the new MCLs for PFAS chemicals is a costly \$772 million to \$1.2 billion, but the American Water Works Association conducted a study with Black and Veatch, and their findings estimated the cost to be **over \$3.8 billion annually**. Small water systems and disadvantaged communities will pay the highest price for these regulations.

For the City of Columbia, South Carolina, implementing this new MCL limit would require adding new treatment capabilities estimated to cost the municipality \$150 million. On top of that, the additional operation and maintenance costs would be \$20 million annually, increasing annual treatment costs from \$17 million to \$37 million. Columbia's water system is expansive, but the system's revenue will not be able to cover these extreme upgrades to be in compliance. Therefore, ratepayers – the citizens of Columbia – will have to help foot this hefty bill.

Per the **Safe Drinking Water Act**, the EPA must follow the science and analyze the costs and benefits when implementing new regulations. The gravity of the impact of PFOA/PFOS chemicals at the observed low levels is still unknown, so the EPA's new hazard index lacks basis and relies on inconsistent data. It is also proven that **PFAS levels in Americans have been dropping dramatically** for the past two decades and are expected to decline even further without any EPA limits. The EPA must learn more from continued monitoring to base its regulations on science.

If the EPA continues to ignore the science, they must look more closely at the cost-benefit analysis. Even with the **record \$50 billion** federal investment in drinking water provided by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, drinking water systems will struggle to finance and implement this rule – especially systems serving small, rural and disadvantaged communities. This federal investment only covers \$9 billion of PFAS associated costs. The remaining funds are intended to help municipalities struggling to comply with other unfunded mandates like the recent Revised Lead and Copper Rule, which is estimated to cost more than **\$90 billion** nationally.

We must prioritize public health and balance the real costs associated with these regulations. Our water systems are working hard daily to protect the public. And with our citizens coming out of a pandemic and experiencing a fragile economy, meeting these new standards will cost an arm and a leg and deprive our water systems of resources that could be used for additional maintenance and improvements.

We are Mayors, not environmental experts. However, it seems clear that the science is not there, the benefits do not outweigh the costs, and most importantly, the EPA is forcing local communities to carry the burden.

We have shared the impact these limits will have on our communities. Together, we ask the EPA to slow down and not place maximum contamination levels on PFAS chemicals that will cost our citizens billions.

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