

PERSISTENT POLLUTANTS

EPA sets limits for 6 PFAS in drinking water

Regulation will help protect 100 million people from exposure to ‘forever chemicals,’ agency says

To help protect people from harmful per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and ensure access to clean drinking water, the US Environmental Protection Agency has finalized tough new limits for six PFAS in drinking water. The standard, announced April 10, will “reduce PFAS exposure for approximately 100 million people,



The US Environmental Protection Agency is cracking down on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances in drinking water.

prevent thousands of deaths, and reduce tens of thousands of serious illnesses,” the EPA says.

For two of the most commonly found and most toxic PFAS—perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS)—the EPA set a limit of 4 parts per trillion each, the same level it proposed last year. The chemicals aren’t produced in the US anymore, but they were used in numerous consumer products for decades and still contaminate many drinking-water supplies.

For three additional PFAS—perfluorononanoic acid (PFNA), perfluorohexanesulfonic acid (PFHxS), and hexafluoropropylene oxide dimer acid (HFPO-DA, used in Chemours’s GenX product)—the EPA capped levels at 10 parts per trillion each. The agency also set a limit for mixtures containing at least two of the following PFAS: perfluorobutanesulfonic acid (PFBS), PFNA, PFHxS, and HFPO-DA.

Commonly called forever chemicals because they are slow to break down in the environment, PFAS are a class of more than 10,000 compounds known for their ability to repel grease and water. Those targeted by the EPA’s new drinking-water standard “have been linked to serious illnesses, including cancer, liver damage, and high cholesterol,” EPA administrator Michael Regan said during a press briefing. “With today’s action, we are one huge step closer to finally shutting off the tap on forever chemicals once and for all.”

The EPA’s action on PFAS in drinking water is “the most consequential and difficult decision to protect drinking water in the past 30 years,” Ken Cook, president of the Environmental Working Group, an advocacy organization, said at the press briefing. “This was a big, tough decision.”

The EPA estimates that complying with the rule will cost the drinking-water industry \$1.5 billion. But the American Water Works Association, a water industry group, says the actual cost will likely be three to four times as high, and much of the burden will fall on small water systems.

The chemical industry also opposes the rule. “Since this proposal was first announced, new real-world data has become available through national monitoring that confirms the rationale for this proposal is based on inaccurate and out-of-date information,” the American Chemistry Council, which represents chemical makers, says in a statement. “Failure to incorporate this data into the final rule means that the number of small water systems that will be impacted by the new standard is three times higher than EPA estimated, forcing them to divert critical resources away from other higher-priority drinking water needs.”

The new rule gives public water systems a total of 5 years to comply with the limits.

The EPA estimates that 6–10% of the 66,000 public water systems in the US will need to install treatment technology. The actual number will become clearer once water utilities provide PFAS monitoring data to the EPA.—BRITT ERICKSON

CHEMICAL REGULATION

Legacy asbestos poses health risk

The US Environmental Protection Agency has released a draft of the second part of its risk evaluation for asbestos. The draft focuses on the health risks associated with legacy asbestos, which can still be found in the insulation, roofing, and other construction materials that make up older buildings.

According to the preliminary assessment, the agency has found that exposure to legacy asbestos “poses unreasonable risk to human health.”

The Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization (ADAO) says it strongly supports the EPA’s conclusion. “Legacy asbestos exposure poses a serious danger to public health and can be responsible for numerous asbestos-caused diseases including, cancers, mesothelioma and lung disease,” president Linda Reinstein says in a statement.

The risk assessment arrives nearly a month after the EPA banned ongoing uses of chrysotile asbestos, the only type of asbestos still used in and imported into the US. The ban was based on a 2020 evaluation of asbestos, which the ADAO and other groups strongly criticized because it excluded the risk associated with legacy uses of chrysotile asbestos and other asbestos fibers.

The EPA agreed to complete part two of its asbestos evaluation, which includes legacy uses, by Dec. 1, 2024, under a 2021 settlement with the ADAO.

Reinstein says that ADAO experts will be closely reviewing the draft and will bring any gaps or deficiencies to the EPA’s attention during the 60-day public comment period. The American Chemistry Council (ACC), a trade group, says in a statement that it will also be providing comments to the EPA. The ACC has expressed “strong concerns” with the risk evaluation “given the broad scope of the assessment.”—KRISTAL VASQUEZ