

EPA proposes first standards to make drinking water safer from ‘forever chemicals’

By [Jen Christensen](#), CNN

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The US Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday [proposed](#) the first national drinking water standard for “forever chemicals” that are dangerous to human health. The move could radically affect drinking water for nearly everyone in the United States.

The new rule intends to set drinking water standards for six per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, also known as PFAS or “forever chemicals.” PFAS are [a family of ubiquitous synthetic chemicals](#) that linger in the environment and the human body, where they can cause serious health problems.

Although there are thousands of PFAS chemicals, according to the [National Institutes of Health](#), under the rule, water systems would have to monitor for six specific chemicals, notify the public about PFAS levels and work to reduce them if levels go above the standard allowed.

“I am thrilled to announce that EPA is taking yet another bold step to protect public health,” said US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan at a news conference on Tuesday in Wilmington, North Carolina. “Folks, this is a tremendous step forward in the right direction. We anticipate that when fully implemented, this rule will prevent thousands of deaths and reduce tens of thousands of serious PFAS related illnesses.”

Regan said the proposed rule would protect the health of people for generations. He characterized PFAS contamination as “one of the most pressing environmental and public health concerns in the modern world.”

The agency chose these chemicals because it has the clearest science about their impact on human health and said it is evaluating additional chemicals, as well.

The EPA’s proposed limits set the allowable levels for these chemicals so low that they could not be easily detected.

The proposal would regulate two chemicals, PFOA and PFOS, at 4 parts per trillion (ppt). For PFNA, PFHxS, PFBS and GenX chemicals, the EPA proposes not one standard for each but a limit for a mix of them.

Water systems would have to determine whether the levels of these PFAS pose a potential risk. They may need to install treatment or take other action to reduce PFAS levels, the agency said, and systems may also even need to switch to different water sources.

Found in homes across the country

The proposal would be one of the first [new chemical standards](#) that updates the Safe Drinking Water Act since 1996. The proposed standards would be much stricter than the EPA [suggested in](#)

Manufacturer 3M recently announced it would stop making them by the end of 2025. The American Chemistry Council, an association that represents chemical makers, said that PFOA and PFOS were phased out of production by its members more than eight years ago. “We support restrictions on their use globally, and we support drinking water standards for PFOA and PFOS based on the best available science,” the council said in an email to CNN. It does, however, say it has “serious concerns” about the science that the EPA used to create the rule that it calls “conservative.”

At the federal level, the US Food and Drug Administration phased out the use of certain PFAS chemicals in 2016. The FDA and manufacturers also agreed in 2020 to phase out some PFAS chemicals from food packaging and other items that came into contact with food. However, FDA monitoring of the environment showed that the chemicals tend to linger, as the “forever” name implies.

A replacement that many chemical companies have been using, GenX, may also be problematic, according to the EPA. Animal studies have shown that it may affect the liver, kidneys and immune system, and it might be linked to cancer.

In June, for the first time, the EPA issued final advisories for limits in drinking water of GenX, considered a replacement for PFOA, and PFBS, a replacement for PFOS: less than 10 ppt and 2,000 ppt, respectively.

The Biden administration has taken some steps to help eliminate exposure to this pollution. As a part of the 2022 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, \$10 billion was made available for cleanup of contaminants like PFAS in drinking water.

In February, the EPA also announced \$2 billion available to address contaminants like PFAS in drinking water in small, rural and disadvantaged communities. Regan said the Biden administration is asking Congress for more resources to clean up PFAS pollution.

Environmental groups applaud move

Tuesday’s announcement “is really historic and long overdue,” said Melanie Benesh, vice president of government affairs for the Environmental Working Group, an environmental research and advocacy group. “There are a lot of communities that have been exposed to these chemicals for decades.

“It’s clear that these chemicals are toxic at very low levels and the EPA is responding to that risk, and I think this is a huge win for public health,” she added.

A new rule, paired with actual resources to clean up contamination and to make sure communities can test for these chemicals, is an important step, said Sarah Doll, national director of Safer States, a group that works to help communities prevent harm caused by dangerous chemicals.

People who want to make their water safer in the meantime can use point-of-entry or point-of-use filters with activated carbon or reverse osmosis membranes, which have been shown to be effective at removing PFAS from water, the EPA says.