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U.S.

EPA Lowers Bar for Toxic Chemicals Contamination

Agency cut the level at which it said substances known as PFAS might be harmful



By *Kris Maher* [Follow](#)

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The Environmental Protection Agency sharply lowered safe-consumption levels for so-called forever chemicals in drinking water, signaling its conclusion that the widely found substances are more hazardous than previously thought.

While not enforceable, the new levels could have far-reaching effects on state drinking water regulations, pending federal rules and thousands of lawsuits involving chemicals found in firefighting foam and contamination from legacy uses of the chemicals.

The EPA's move on Wednesday came a day after the Biden administration said it would spend \$1 billion to address contamination from the chemicals, known as perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS.

Industry groups said that the agency had failed to wait for a peer review of toxicity assessments to be completed. The American Chemistry Council criticized the EPA's methodology and said the new health-advisory levels will have sweeping implications for policies at the state and federal levels.

PFAS are a class of thousands of related chemicals that have been used for their water-repellent and fire-retardant qualities. They are called forever chemicals because they accumulate in people and animals and take a long time to break down in the environment.

The chemicals have been linked to health problems including kidney and testicular cancers, thyroid disease and high cholesterol. Some epidemiologists and toxicologists say the chemicals could be toxic at levels far lower than other contaminants found in drinking water.

The environmental agency had previously set a combined health advisory level for two chemicals, PFOA and PFOS, of 70 parts per trillion. The new individual limits for the substances released Wednesday are 0.004 ppt for PFOA and 0.02 ppt for PFOS. For the first time, EPA also set health advisory levels for two others. The level for GenX was 10 ppt, and for PFBS it was 2,000 ppt.

Chemical manufacturer Chemours Co. said that in determining the health advisory level for GenX, which the company uses, the EPA relied on a toxicity study that was flawed and significantly overstates the potential for risk.

Environmental groups that have been calling for stronger regulation of PFAS said the new levels would likely trigger greater public concern in communities where PFAS have already been found in water systems.

“There’s simply no turning back now that the EPA has confirmed what scientists have been saying for years, which is that these chemicals are toxic at extremely low levels,” said Scott Faber, senior vice president of government affairs for the Environmental Working Group.

The EPA in December issued a rule requiring public water systems that serve more than 3,300 customers to test for 29 PFAS chemicals, including GenX. Testing is scheduled to begin in January 2023.

A study by researchers at Harvard University found that about six million people were served by water systems that had combined levels of PFOA and PFOS above 70 ppt.

Write to Kris Maher at kris.maher@wsj.com

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