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# Push for solutions to maintain clean water

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Knowledge is power. We notice when the trash isn't picked up or the electricity goes out but few people will ever notice contaminants in their drinking water. Similarly, they won't notice aging underground pipes until one of them breaks and the utility has to issue a boil water advisory. (That, of course, is assuming they notice the advisory.) Here is what you need to do.

## 1. Get to know your utility's water quality record.

The first step is to find out how good the water you're drinking actually is.

If you drink from a private well, you should already be testing your water regularly. The responsibility is entirely on you.

If you drink from a public water system (examples: Pennsylvania American Water or Capital Region Water), you should be getting an annual consumer confidence report. It's an extra few sheets of paper in one of your bills.

You don't have to wait for the report to check on your water quality, however. For this, you can go to the DEP's online Drinking Water Reporting System, select search by system name, type in the name of your supplier and the type of information you want to view. This database includes information about violations and the results of water tests (called detail sample results).

On the detail sample results page, you have the option to check a number of different types of contaminants. The two columns you need to pay attention to are ANALYSIS RESULT, which shows the actual contaminant level, and MCL IN EFFECT, the acceptable level of the contaminant. If the analysis result is higher than the MCL in effect, your system has a problem.

## 2. Test your own water.

It's important to understand that the data you find on the state website comes from the water systems themselves. Most systems make a good faith effort to submit accurate samples. That said, there have been many incidents of fraudulent data being submitted (Steelton was one recent example) or improper collection and testing procedures resulting in faulty data. There have also been circumstances in which a high contaminant level wasn't immediately flagged, one factor that led to the recent suspension of a Middletown-area laboratory.

Finally, water systems don't test water quality everywhere. Lead levels, for example, vary widely from one area to the next because the contaminant tends to concentrate in older or more isolated parts of the system. Your own plumbing can also be the source of contaminants, something that would only be reflected if the system tested water from your tap.

You can pick up a drinking water test kit from many county agricultural extension offices, DEP regional offices or state accredited laboratories. Call ahead to ensure they have the test kit you need in stock. Costs vary but Penn State's lab, for example, charges \$25 for a lead test, \$35 for a bacteria and coliform test and \$50 for a pH test, without accounting for shipping costs.

If you find a problem with the drinking water you get from a public system, you can submit a complaint to the DEP. Keep in mind, however, that the agency is short staffed and may take a while to process that complaint.

## 3. Install and properly use a water filter.

Water filters aren't entirely foolproof, but they do offer some piece of mind at a relatively low cost. According to the Beverage Marketing Corp., the average price per gallon of bottled water was \$1.25 in 2016. The price for tap water was \$0.004 per gallon, according to the American Water Works Association.

Not all filters are created equal, of course, but the National Sanitation Foundation offers a useful guide to different types of filters and the contaminants they reduce.

## 4. Encourage your utility to get rid of its lead pipes.

A 2016 estimate by the American Water Works Association found 6.1 million lead service lines at public water systems that serve between 15 million and 22 million people nationwide. Most of those systems use chemicals to prevent lead from leaching into drinking water but Edwards noted that it's virtually impossible to get to zero lead. Furthermore, systems have been known to skimp on treatment when times are tough.

One potential solution is to pressure utilities, state lawmakers and your congressional delegation to phase out those lead service lines. It's not cheap, of course. In Pittsburgh alone, the cost to replace those lines is estimated at \$560 million and there are there's little state or federal aid available to pay for such replacements. Any effort to remove the lines would inevitably fall back on residents—to customers of the systems via rate hikes or to taxpayers more broadly.

## 5. Identify (and possibly replace) lead pipes in your home.

Removing lead service lines may be only one half of the problem. For years, utilities have replaced the lines they own, if at all, up to private property lines. That's problematic because such partial replacements dislodge large amounts of lead, which ends up going into the adjacent homes once the partial replacement is completed.

Last year, the state Legislature approved language allowing municipal authorities to replace the private side of the line if such a replacement would improve public health.

Given the expense involved, in most places you probably can't rely on your utility to do the work for you. And service lines are only part of the problem. If your home was built prior to the 1986 ban, there's a chance it has lead pipes inside the home. And lead continued to be used to make brass fix-

tures through 2014.

There are two ways to find out if you have a lead service line.

First, locate the water service line coming into the building. In homes, this would usually be in the basement or crawlspace on the wall facing the street. Using the flat edge of a screwdriver, gently scrape an area of the service line. Then, touch a magnet to the pipe and see if it sticks. Lead pipes, which are normally dull on the outside, will appear shiny in the scratched area and will not attract the magnet. (Copper pipes will look shiny like a penny and not attract the magnet. Steel will remain dull in the scratched area but will draw the magnet.)

If the service line entering your home is made of lead, it's possible the utility's lines are also lead. Call your utility and ask them. Many utilities don't have inventories of their lead lines, so they may not have an answer. Find out if the utility has any recommendations for what to do with the lead line. If the responsibility falls entirely to you, the cost will vary widely depending on how many lead lines need to be replaced and what type of property you own. The cost for an individual row home in an urban center (i.e. without a yard between the home and the curb) typically costs between \$5,000 to \$15,000.

## 6. Increase federal funding for safe drinking water.

President Donald Trump's last budget proposal originally called for slashing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's budget by 31 percent. That's a problem because most states, including Pennsylvania, receive about a third of their funding for environmental programs via passthroughs from the EPA. The omnibus appropriations bill passed by Congress and signed March 23 by the president kept the EPA's budget the same as 2017. That, too, is problematic given inflation and the increasing reliance of cash-strapped states on federal funding. But it could have been far worse.

Trump's infrastructure plan, meanwhile, emphasizes private investment over federal funding. It doesn't, for example, contain any additional money for the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, which offer grants and low-interest loans for sewer and water projects that the systems may not otherwise be able to afford. As Lisa Daniels, who heads the DEP's drinking water program said: "I'm just not sure I see investors out there that are necessarily interested in investing."

Like state lawmakers, drinking water generally isn't top of mind for Pennsylvania's congressional delegation — nor, it seems, the president. These officials get form letters all the time. The best thing you can do is to call or write to them personally and be sure to make it clear that you live in their district.

## 7. Increase state funding for safe drinking water.

Oversight problems at the state Department of Environmental Protection, which is responsible for safeguarding drinking water standards, are due in large part to a decade of budget cuts starting in 2009. In recent years, state funding has crept upward but those increases haven't been enough. Had the agency's 2008 budget kept pace with inflation, it would now be \$271 million. Current state funding in the newly enacted budget is \$153 million.

State funding also plays a role at PennVEST, the program that provides grants and low-interest loans to struggling water and sewer systems. A large portion of the program's funding comes via the federal government but the state has also taken out a series of general obligation bonds approved via referendum, the most recent in 2008, to pay for infrastructure improvements. One proposal to send a \$600 million bond out to referendum is currently sitting in the state Senate Environmental Resources and Energy Committee, awaiting a vote.

State officials generally don't get a lot of feedback from ordinary citizens and very seldom do they hear about drinking water issues. The best thing you can do is to send a personalized letter to your representatives in the state House and Senate, or to the leadership of both chambers. You can also call their offices and ask to meet with them.

## 8. Prepare to pay more for your water.

In order to pay for more drinking water inspectors, the state DEP plans to — eventually — raise \$7.5 million in fees from the water systems it oversees. Ultimately, those costs will be passed on to the customers of those systems in the form of rate increases.

(Late last month, those fees passed a final vote before the Independent Regulatory Review Commission on its way to a 30-day review period by the state attorney general's office.)

Infrastructure improvements, too, are generally passed on to ratepayers. One of the reasons so many systems have failed to make those improvements is economic and political pressure to keep those rates low.

According to the American Water Works Association, the average American pays \$0.004 per gallon for tap water. A 2016 report by the nonprofit WaterAid found that people in the U.K. pay \$0.007. A typical Indian pays 5 cents per gallon and, in Papua New Guinea, 19 cents per gallon.

To put that in context, the average American family pays roughly \$48 per month for 12,000 gallons of water. That same family would be paying \$84 in the U.K., \$600 in India and \$2,280 in Papua New Guinea. Of course, water consumption and waste is far less in each of those countries and 60 percent of Papua New Guinea's population lacks access to safe drinking water altogether. The high price they pay is for clean water brought in from elsewhere.

Make no mistake. There are serious consequences for underfunding water systems and the regulatory agencies that ensure that water is safe.

One way or another, the bill will come due.