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 underground pipes until one of them breaks and the utility has to issue a boil water advisory. (That’s because if 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 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 that, you can go to the DEP’s online Drinking Water Reporting System, select search by system name in the name of your supplier and the type of information you want to view. This database includes institutional samples, violations and the results of water tests (called detail sample results).

On the detailed 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 results are higher than the MCL in effect, your system has a problem.

2. Test your own water.

In order to understand that the data you find on the state website comes from the water systems themselves. Most of them are a good faith effort to submit accurate samples. That said, there have been many incidents of fraud, including one by a company submitted (Steele 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 Middlesex area laboratory.

In homes, systems don’t test water quality everywhere at once, so you might want to test a few years from consecutively nearby areas, and check if the results are the same.

3. Install and properly use a water filter.

Water filters aren’t entirely foolproof, but they do offer some level of relatively low cost. According to the Beverage Marketing Corp., the average price per gallon of bottled water is $0.25 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 2018 estimate by the American Water Works Association found that lead and copper 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 still isn’t possible to go 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 $60 million and there are still outside or federal aid available to pay for such replacements. Any effort to remove the lead would inevitability 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 one only half of the problem. For years, utilities have replaced the lines they own at an expense; private property lines. That’s problematic because such partial replacements dilute large amounts of lead, which gets going up into the adjacent homes once the partial replacement is completed.

In 2005, the state Department of Environmental Protection approved a program to replace the private side of the line. The DEP estimated that program 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 is a chance it has lead pipes inside the home. And lead continued to be used to make brass fittings 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 crawl space 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 scraped 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 of 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 home in an urban center (i.e., without a yard between the home and the curb) typically costs between $15,000 to $50,000.

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 35 percent. That’s a problem because most states, including Pennsylvania, receive about a third of their funding for the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, which offer grants and low-interest loans to struggling states, from the federal government. But it could have been worse.

Trump’s infrastructure plan, meanwhile, envisioned 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 offers grants and low-interest loans for sewer and water projects that the states may not otherwise be able to afford. As Laura Dunn, 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 regulators, drinking water generally isn’t top of mind for Pennsylvania’s congressional delegation — not, it seems, the president. These officials get from 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.

Overnight problems at the state Department of Environmental Protection, which is responsible for protecting water and sewer systems, are due in large part to decades of budget cuts starting in 2009. In recent years, state funding has been restored to the levels it was during the Corbett administration. That’s a problem because most states, including Pennsylvania, receive about a third of their funding for the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, which offer grants and low-interest loans for sewer and water projects that the states may not otherwise be able to afford. As Laura Dunn, 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.”

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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 on to ratepayers. One of the reasons so many systems have on to ratepayers. One of the reasons so many systems have increased rates is to pay for increased staffing, equipment and other new hires, 33 in all, all of which are necessary to keep those rates low.

The DEP proffered last year. The prevailing tone among environmentalists was “not enough” to strike down key portions of the EPA’s 2016 “Water Quality Rule” and the “Water Quality Rule” and the revised “Interim Waters of the United States” rule that would protect water quality and the esthetic values of the environment.

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