

LONG ISLAND / ENVIRONMENT

State proposes new drinking water standards for 3 chemicals



The Suffolk County Water Authority's Advanced Oxidation Process treatment system, designed to remove the contaminant 1,4-dioxane from groundwater, at the SCWA Commercial Boulevard pump station in Central Islip in December 2018. Photo Credit: Barry Sloan

By David M. Schwartz

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The state Department of Health recommended new drinking water standards for three chemicals on Monday, the first time in nearly 20 years new contaminants would be regulated in New York.

The proposed limit for 1,4-dioxane of 1 part per billion would be a first in the nation, according to state health officials. The chemicals known as PFOS and PFOA each would be limited to 10 parts per trillion.

"We're proposing the most protective levels in the nation for three emerging contaminants to ensure we are regularly testing and fixing water systems before they ever rise to a public health risk in any part of the state," Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said in a statement.

Health Commissioner Dr. Howard Zucker's recommendations for maximum contaminant levels, or MCLs, follow limits put forward in December by a panel of health experts, state officials and drinking water providers that the state had convened. The chemicals have been found in New York drinking

water supplies from Montauk to Hoosick Falls.

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Water providers have warned that costs for treatment could double water rates and top \$1.5 billion, including an estimated \$840 million for treatment of 1,4-dioxane alone.

The state said Monday that \$350 million in grants will be available to providers for treatment.

Some environmental groups had pushed for stricter limits that would be more protective of public health. Those groups, along with health advocates, have wanted the state to adopt new standards for the chemicals for years, saying the federal Environmental Protection Agency has been slow to respond to a growing list of contaminants in the water.

The proposed regulations do not have a firm timeline for when water providers would have to come into compliance, but they would have to test and submit action plans on how they would meet the new standards.

Particularly difficult and expensive to treat is 1,4-dioxane, a likely carcinogen according to the EPA that is used in solvents at industrial sites and also found in trace amounts in personal care products, such as detergents. The state has approved only one treatment system — in Central Islip — though others are being piloted. A federal survey of drinking water wells found 71 percent of water-supply systems tested on Long Island had low levels of the chemical.

The state on Monday also announced \$27 million in grants divided between nine Long Island water districts, mostly to treat 1,4-dioxane.

Those include the Franklin Square Water District, Greenlawn Water District, the Town of Hempstead's East Meadow Water District, Town of Huntington, Manhasset-Lakeville Water District, Oyster Bay Water District, Port Washington Water District, South Farmingdale Water District and West Hempstead Water District.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Farmingdale-based Citizens Campaign for the Environment, called the announcement "a critical, necessary victory for public health. These chemicals are all linked to severe health impacts, including cancer."

In a statement, she said "it would be irresponsible to continue to allow these contaminants to be unregulated. The lack of federal action about this issue is alarming and risky. We are thankful New York stepped up where the federal government fell down in protecting our water from pollutants."

The last contaminant to be added to those regulated in New York drinking water was the gasoline additive MTBE in 2000.

Some environmental groups had pushed for even tougher standards for the chemicals than those recommended Monday, citing risks to public health from long-term exposures.

"The science indicates they should go lower," said Elizabeth Moran, environmental policy director of the New York Public Interest Research Group. "Unfortunately, some of the standards they proposed are now out-of-date."

Maureen Cunningham, senior director for Clean Water at Environmental Advocates of New York, said in a statement, "This long-awaited first step puts New York on a path to cleaner drinking water. ... However, recent science shows that there is likely no safe level of these chemicals, and the state MCLs must reflect this."

Dennis Kelleher, spokesman for the Long Island Water Conference, said that while water providers are committed to meeting the new standards, they "will require a new, state-of-the-art" treatment system for 1,4-dioxane. "We are urging the Department of Health to give water providers ample time

to purchase and test those treatment systems to meet the new standards,” he said.

The man-made 1,4-dioxane has been found in trace amounts throughout Long Island’s drinking water, with the highest detection in the nation measured at a well in Hicksville. The state estimated 89 wells, most of which are on the Island, would need treatment for 1,4-dioxane, though water providers said that was an undercount.

Perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS) is found in firefighting foams and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) is used in manufacturing and stain- and water-resistant material.

PFOS has been detected at Gabreski Air National Guard Base in Westhampton Beach, near a fire training academy in Yaphank and near the East Hampton airport. The state in December estimated 23 percent of public water wells in New York would need treatment for PFOS and PFOA.

A Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in the New York State Register was submitted Monday. It is expected to be published on Wednesday, July 24, and that is when a 60-day public comment period will begin. Public comments can be sent to regsqna@health.ny.gov.

Following assessment of public comments, the proposed regulation will either be revised or submitted for adoption by the Public Health and Health Planning Council, subject to the approval of the commissioner of health. The regulation will go into effect upon publication of a Notice of Adoption in the New York State Register.

Once adopted, public water systems would have to test their water and comply with the adopted MCLs. Most water supplies will need to submit their first round of test results within three months of rule adoption.



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