

New Jersey Spotlight

[Energy & Environment](#)

Water-Contamination Watchdog Restarts Work With Focus on PFCs

[Jon Hurdle](#) | April 30, 2014

New chairman vows to resist any attempts to 'subvert the process' of the Drinking Water Quality Institute



A panel that advises state officials on the quality of New Jersey's drinking water met for the first time since 2010 on Tuesday, and pledged to focus its work on contamination by a class of chemicals that has been linked with cancer and developmental problems.

The nearly four-year hiatus since the most recent meeting of the Drinking Water Quality Institute was not without controversy. It was prompted by the resignation of its then-chairman, who was frustrated by the state Department of Environmental Protection not acting on the institute's recommendations for tougher standards.

The [reconstituted 15-member panel](#), which includes academic scientists, government researchers, and water industry officials, will test for, treat, and assess the health effects of perfluorinated chemicals (PFCs), some of which have been found in New Jersey at higher concentrations than elsewhere in the United States.

It will be chaired by Keith Cooper, a professor of toxicology at Rutgers University.

In opening remarks to the two-hour session in Lawrenceville, Cooper said the panel had not met since September 2010 because it took time to fill a number of vacant positions, and because of two major hurricanes that severely disrupted water supplies in many parts of the state, and consumed members' time.

As an advisory body to the state's Department of Environmental Protection, the panel will make its recommendations on a strictly scientific basis, and will strenuously avoid policy prescriptions, Dr. Cooper said.

"It's a science-based determination," he said. "I'm not going to get involved in policy, and I'm not going to have my scientists tied up in that."

Dr. Cooper also said that a long-awaited DEP report on PFC water contamination around the state would be released "very soon."

The panel has chosen to work on three types of PFCs -- PFNA, PFOA, and PFOS -- and will recommend maximum contaminant limits that would establish the highest levels at which the chemicals could be present in drinking water without representing a threat to human health.

, Cooper indicated that the panel has selected PFCs because of evidence that they occur in drinking water and build up in the bodies of people who drink contaminated water.

"The PFCs are persistent, and they accumulate in the blood," he said in an interview. "That's one of the reasons why we decided that these were really compounds to look at. Nobody had really looked at them, they had been assumed to be pretty innocuous. I don't want foreign substances that are persistent in my blood," he said.

PFCs are widespread, and have been used for household items such as stain-resistant carpeting, water-resistant clothing, and food-processing equipment, and they don't break down, he said.

One type of the family, PFNA, has been found in high concentrations in the South Jersey town of Paulsboro, and its source has been traced to a nearby chemical manufacturer, which no longer uses it.

The prevalence of PFNA in Paulsboro led the DEP and the state's Department of Health in January to advise parents not to feed public water to infants and children under the age of one. More recently, the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Control said it would conduct an investigation, in partnership with the health department, into the contamination at Paulsboro.

Even if PFCs in a particular location can be traced to a specific source, they can be dispersed over a wide area via the air, and so can be found long distances from their source, Cooper said.

"There could be a background level of these compounds which are present, and that's one of the reasons why the data are picking these concentrations in blood samples from around the country," he said.

The chemicals have been found as far away as the Arctic, indicating that their source is something other than industry, Dr. Cooper said.

“There’s no industrial source, so how did they get there?” he asked. “Either through the food chain or through atmospheric deposition.”

Gloria Post, a panel member and an official in the DEP’s Office of Science, presented data showing that 9.3 percent of 75 large public water systems reporting in New Jersey were found to contain a certain type of PFOA at above a “guidance” level for safe water consumption set by the department. That prevalence compared with a national rate of only 1.4 percent among tested sites, she said.

For all PFCs, 14.7 percent of New Jersey locations tested were found to have elevated levels, compared with less than 5.3 percent nationally, Post told the meeting.

Conventional water treatment does not remove PFCs, but the chemicals can be extracted by specialized methods including reverse osmosis and granular activated carbon filters, she said.

Tracy Carluccio, deputy director of Delaware Riverkeeper Network, an environmental group that has pressed for the panel to resume its work, welcomed the restart but urged the panel to work as quickly as possible so that maximum contaminant limits (MCLs) can be established.

“How long is this going to take before an MCL is recommended?” she asked. “We could be sitting here a year from now and still not have a standard because the process takes so long.”

Carluccio also accused “special interests” such as the Chemistry Council of New Jersey, a trade group for chemical manufacturers, of “shutting down” the DWQI process in the past, and urged panel members to ensure that their work was not tainted by business or other groups.

“I’m looking for an assurance that this is truly going to be an independent agency,” she said.

Cooper said the panel would meet three or four times a year, and that he would make sure the public and non-governmental organizations like Carluccio’s group were included, while seeking to exclude any parties who sought to use the panel to further their own agendas.

“I will fight tooth and nail if there are people who are going to subvert this process,” he said.

Gary Buchanan, manager of the DEP’s Office of Science, said meetings of the reconstituted DWQI will be open to members of the public who will be able to make their own contributions during a public-comment period. Minutes will be posted on the DEP’s website, he said.

After receiving recommendations from three subcommittees on health effects, testing, and treatment, the full DWQI will recommend maximum contaminant limits for specific chemicals, which will then be submitted to the DEP commissioner ahead of a final rule-making.

<file:///H:/Riverkeeper%20Word/Homewaters/Dupont/PFOAs/DWQI/Water-Contamination%20Watchdog%20Restarts%20Work%20With%20Focus%20on%20PFCs%20-%20NJ%20Spotlight.htm>