

## Philadelphia Inquirer

### Opinion

#### Pennsylvania must act faster on PFAS regulations | Opinion

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Tracy Carluccio, for the Inquirer



TYGER WILLIAMS / Staff Photographer

People across Pennsylvania are drinking water containing highly toxic chemicals while the state takes its time studying it.

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), a group of synthetic chemicals, are found in nonstick papers such as food containers, stain- and water-resistant fabric, firefighting foam, Teflon, and durable plastics. Firefighting foams used at military bases are one of the most prolific sources of contamination nationwide and within the state.

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Pennsylvania is lagging behind despite known PFAS contamination of several major drinking water sources in the state. The limited action the state has taken has resulted from prodding by the public, municipal government, and elected officials or was initiated by outside entities such as the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry or the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In September 2018, Governor Wolf finally issued an executive order to set up a “PFAS Action Team” — but it said nothing about setting [maximum contaminant limits](#). The effect has been to slow-walk cleanup of the state’s drinking water.

It is disgraceful that the Pa Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) sat on its hands knowing full well that the state has a big PFAS contamination problem, dating back at least to the public disclosure in 2014 of military [base contamination](#) in Bucks and Montgomery Counties communities, and elsewhere in the state.

When further sampling revealed that the contamination had spread further than early tests showed, DEP sat waiting, presumably for a response from the federal government. Even when my organization, Delaware Riverkeeper Network, filed a petition with the Environmental Quality Board in 2017 for a safe drinking water standard, also known as a maximum contaminant level (MCL), to be set urgently for PFOA, a common PFAS, DEP sat motionless.

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This was despite next-door neighbor, New Jersey, completing the essential scientific analysis and risk assessments to adopt MCLs for PFAS, and other states moving ahead to do the same. In fact, New Jersey was the first state to adopt an MCL for any PFAS. Their scientific leadership and action to pursue those responsible for the pollution is recognized nationally. Pennsylvania did not seem to take heed.

It has been established for years that PFAS buildup in the human body and the higher the concentration in the blood, the greater the risk of developing a disease linked to the compounds. These include cancer, thyroid disease, and potentially devastating effects in infants and children. Residents in Horsham, Warminster, and Warrington Townships were found in a December 2018 report to have [elevated levels of PFAS](#) in their blood.

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The halfway measures taken by the state so far are shallow. For instance, the [military bases responsible](#) for the contamination in Bucks and Montgomery Counties have used the EPA Health Advisory Level (HAL) as the trigger point for drinking water remediation, as shown in a recent Willow Grove Station meeting. The problem is, the HAL is not universally accepted as safe. In 2018, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry landed on PFAS regulation levels that are [much lower than the HAL](#) and are closer to what New Jersey uses. In fact, since 2016, eight states have [developed drinking water guidelines](#) lower than EPA's HAL. The USEPA cannot be expected to take more protective action in a timely way — in fact, they haven't set a new [MCL for any contaminant since 1996](#).

The only effective action taken has been in Bucks and Montgomery Counties at the municipal level, where officials are using their authority to completely remove PFAS and purchase PFAS-free water for residents, because no one else is.

Pennsylvania has identified over 500 water systems that need to be tested in all parts of the commonwealth. This is a water crisis that screams for DEP to fulfill its responsibility by establishing statewide MCLs for PFAS now. Instead they are conducting more sampling, which the state says will take more than a year to complete all phases.

The Environmental Quality Board is empowered under [PA's Safe Drinking Water Act](#) to establish MCLs, upon DEP's recommendation, without legislation or executive action by the governor.

So why the delay? Every day that goes by without action is another day Wolf and DEP deprive Pennsylvanians of their constitutional right to clean water. Pennsylvania must step up to recommend and establish MCLs to remove PFAS from drinking water, now. When we take a glass of water from the tap, we should not have to worry that what we are drinking might cause harm.

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