

State of American Drinking Water

By [EWG](#)

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For too many Americans, turning on their faucets for a glass of water is like pouring a cocktail of chemicals. Lead, arsenic, the “forever chemicals” known as PFAS and many other substances are often found in drinking water at potentially unsafe levels, particularly in low-income and underserved communities.

From the lead contamination crisis in Flint, Mich., to widespread radium pollution in Brady, Texas, the perils of unsafe water are finally prompting lawmakers and regulators to weigh how to act.

What’s needed is major new federal funding to improve drinking water quality, pay for much-needed lead line replacements, help disadvantaged areas and start to tackle the widespread PFAS problem that has made headlines across the country.

EWG’s landmark [Tap Water Database](#) shows how polluted drinking water can be, and why the efforts to fix it at the source are vital. The database collects mandatory annual test reports from 2014 to 2019, produced by almost 50,000 water utilities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

It reveals that when some Americans drink a glass of tap water, they’re also potentially getting a dose of industrial or agricultural contaminants linked to cancer, brain and nervous system damage, fertility problems, hormone disruption and other health harms.

And those risks likely increase in underserved communities, particularly those with higher Black or Latino populations. EWG’s research finds that people living in such areas might have a greater collective risk of cancer from the contaminants in their drinking water supplies than people in other parts of the country.

Why does this unacceptable situation persist? One reason is that there is not enough funding to help replace lead pipelines and clean up our drinking water. Another is that federal water safety standards aren’t keeping pace with the latest science on contaminants – some regulations haven’t been updated in more than 50 years, and the Environmental Protection Agency is not moving fast enough on new drinking water rules.

Ambitious efforts to safeguard the water we drink must achieve that goal for every American.

It's easy to be pessimistic about whether that idea is realistic, given that Flint is in [its seventh year](#) of the lead catastrophe. Yet an increased focus by Congress on drinking water funding, the rising and necessary role of environmental equity, and firm commitments for improvements by those with the power to make them happen all provide reason to be hopeful.

Tackling historic inequities in drinking water supplies

A growing number of Democratic and Republican lawmakers are advocating for legislation that would significantly boost funding to improve the quality of drinking water and end long-running pollution problems. Such spending would be an important move toward correcting a historic wrong – the fact that marginalized and low-income communities have the least access to safe drinking water.

[A recent report](#) by the Environmental Policy Innovation Center that analyzed the EPA's drinking water funding program from 2011 to 2020 found that drinking water systems serving smaller communities and communities with greater numbers of people of color were less likely to receive assistance through the program. And without the resources to improve water quality, their systems will continue to suffer.

Flint, a majority-Black city of roughly 100,000 people, may be the most prominent of many recent examples of people suffering with dirty drinking water.

This type of situation occurs when water systems don't get the funds they need to replace harmful lead pipes.

It happens when people living in these areas have no option other than to [buy filters](#) to achieve cleaner water, even though they might not be able to afford them.

It happens when rural communities have no choice but to drink polluted water from wells fouled by industrial agriculture – because there are no resources that provide safe drinking water supplies.

It happens when pollution emergencies occur and communities are told to use bottled water. But this is not a long-term solution. And bottled water can contain contaminants and costs hundreds of times more than tap water.

This means these communities are the ones that suffer most from the harmful effects of consuming unsafe drinking water.

Fixing the situation requires a new approach – ensuring that much-needed aid is prioritized for underserved areas, so all communities can benefit from safer water.

Just because the scale of the problem is vast does not mean it can't be solved. Newark, N.J., took almost five years to [replace 20,000 lead lines](#) following detection of high lead levels in the city's drinking water supplies. But the work is almost done, and just because it requires time and money is no reason not to do it.

Disadvantaged communities that have shouldered an unfair burden of some of the most-polluted drinking water in the country must finally get the help they need, and only a major federal funding boost can achieve community-level improvements.

But achieving true water equity also requires stricter safety standards to ensure that drinking water supplies no longer have pollution levels harmful to human health.

Ensuring water safety standards are adequate and enforceable

The EPA and states do have some standards in place to protect drinking water supplies, but these limits on specific pollutants are often too weak to make the water safe to drink. Even when the standards are sufficiently stringent, a lack of resources to enforce the limits means the water remains unsafe, or that drinking water systems can't fund the upgrades necessary to clean their supplies.

The federal [Safe Drinking Water Act](#), or SDWA, has helped to improve U.S. water quality. Enacted in 1974 and updated in 1986 and 1996, it established EPA standards for some contaminants, such as arsenic, copper and lead. But progress on regulating pollutants has stalled instead of keeping up with current science.

The last time the EPA set a new legal limit for a drinking water pollutant was in 2000, when the agency took steps to lower uranium levels in tap water. Since then, Americans have continued to suffer from widespread drinking water contamination, particularly from emerging contaminants.

This inaction at the federal level continues to exempt from adequate regulation PFAS, hexavalent chromium and more than 160 other unregulated contaminants that pollute tap water. Millions of people are exposed to unsafe drinking water as a result.

For some other chemicals, the EPA's maximum contaminant levels, or MCLs – the upper limit on a pollutant legally allowed in drinking water – haven't been updated in 50 years.

Yet there is extensive scientific research to justify the agency's pursuit of much more stringent MCLs. The legal federal standard for nitrate, for example, is based on a recommendation from 1962, even though studies support lowering the current MCL by several orders of magnitude to protect against the risk of cancer.

Drinking water standards are often based too heavily on cost concerns and political considerations. That's why EWG, focused solely on what's necessary to protect public health within an adequate margin of safety, has [suggested stricter standards](#) for several contaminants that would truly protect public health.

Here's the well-kept secret about existing drinking water standards: Legal doesn't necessarily mean safe. The vast majority of the nation's drinking water supplies get a passing grade from federal and state regulatory agencies. But many of the 324 contaminants detected by local utilities' tests are found at levels that may be legal under EPA's SDWA standards or state regulations – though they far exceed levels authoritative scientific studies have found to pose health risks.

Even for chemicals that are regulated, the legal limit is often hundreds of times higher than the health standards recommended by scientists and public health agencies. Too often, legal limits are based more on what can be achieved in terms of treatment costs, and less

on public health.

And water treatment facilities in many communities, especially in rural areas, are outdated, overloaded or underfunded, as urgently needed investments in water infrastructure get postponed year after year.

But even here, there's reason for optimism. [The EPA has announced plans](#) to initiate a rulemaking to regulate a limited number of industrial PFAS discharges. It falls far short of what's needed to truly tackle these forever chemicals, but it's a move in the right direction that shows some regulators can act when needed.

A common purpose: Safe drinking water for everyone

Polluted tap water is not and should not be a partisan issue; it affects everyone. And finally, it appears that the regulators and lawmakers with the power to address drinking water safety on a community-wide level are starting to listen.

But far more resources are needed from the federal government to thoroughly address all forms and sources of drinking water contamination.

The EPA also needs to [consider drinking water quality](#) as one of the metrics it uses to decide how to distribute its drinking water program funds more equitably, so the worst-affected areas receive the most help.

The quality of U.S. drinking water remains uneven across America. For many, access to safe tap water has been an impossibility for too long.

But with more funding, stronger federal safety standards and a greater focus on helping historically disadvantaged areas, the state of American drinking water can eventually be strong in every community.

There are challenges when it comes to delivering safe drinking water to millions of families who currently don't have it. But they can be solved when the public and our elected officials come together around a common purpose: the right of every American, regardless of race, region or income, to have clean water.

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