4. DRINKING WATER: EPA school plan gets chilly reception at Senate hearing

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Taryn Luntz, E&E reporter

U.S. EPA unveiled plans today to improve the quality of drinking water in schools and small communities by targeting the most serious violations and assisting rural systems that struggle to meet federal standards.

But the plan, announced at a Senate Environment and Public Works Committee hearing, left lawmakers grumbling about a shortage of details about how EPA plans to proceed.

"Kids are being exposed to these contaminants, and they are deadly," said Chairwoman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.). "I need a lot more specificity from you. I'm not confident that we are ready to go."

EPA does not have monitoring requirements for schools. Instead, the agency relies on the schools' water providers to comply with its monitoring requirements and on states to enforce violations.

Agency officials appeared before the committee at the request of Boxer, who had sent a letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson in October expressing "deep concern over the adequacy of drinking water protections" in schools. The letter followed an Associated Press report that found unsafe levels of lead and other pollutants in water supplies at thousands of schools.

EPA officials said they plan to focus financial and technical assistance on water systems that serve fewer than 10,000 people, in which 96 percent of all health-based drinking water violations occur. In some cases, that could include helping small water systems hook into larger systems nearby, said Pete Silva, EPA's assistant administrator for water.

The enforcement arm of the plan includes identifying violators and targeting those systems, large or small, that have the greatest impact on public health, said Cynthia Giles, the agency's assistant administrator for enforcement and compliance assurance.

Boxer said that both the assistance and enforcement provisions are weak.

"We need enforcement now," Boxer said. "I expect to see some enforcement, and I'm going to need it in writing after this hearing. What are you concerned about? Where are you moving?"
Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) also expressed frustration with the lack of detail in Giles' responses. "You're talking about process," Lautenberg said. "I'm talking about results."

Giles said the plan was aimed at focusing the agency's limited resources and was strong enough to make a difference. "It is a mechanism that requires we take enforcement," Giles said. "It's a way of prioritizing which enforcement should be taken first. It says we should focus on systems especially with repeated violations, and it says we should pay special attention to schools."