EPA Safe Drinking Water Standards Go into Effect Today

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National safe drinking water standards go into effect today across the country. Environmental Protection Agency regulations require that the Nation's 40,000 community drinking water systems and 200,000 other public water systems test their water on a routine basis to make sure it's safe to drink. A novel aspect of the law requires utilities to notify consumers if the health standards or sampling requirements are not being met.

"Today marks an important milestone in our effort to insure the safety of the Nation's drinking water supplies," said EPA Deputy Administrator Barbara Blum. "Beginning today, water systems not already doing so will have to initiate programs to sample their water on a routine basis to make sure it meets the interim standards. Many systems already meet these requirements as a result of existing State programs.

"The 'public notification' provision of the regulations is the most novel feature of the new drinking water program," Blum said. "In the future, consumers will know when their water supply systems encounter problems, and they can help determine solutions including how to pay for the improvements."

The regulations going into effect today set health standards for microbiological contaminants, ten inorganic chemicals, six organic pesticides, turbidity (or murkiness) and radiological contamination. These are the first health-related drinking water standards to apply to virtually all public water systems coast to coast.

Some types of water supplies have more time than others to start monitoring for certain contaminants. Monitoring begins immediately for coliform bacteria and turbidity, both of which relate to the possible transmission of immediate illness through drinking water. Monitoring for the chemical contaminants will be phased in, according to a specified schedule.

"This is the first time virtually all public water systems are subject to a uniform and systematic sampling program nationwide," Blum said. "Of special interest to consumers, the law requires the water supply systems to notify customers if the standards aren't being attained. If that happens, the notice to consumers will explain the nature of the problem, specify corrective action that is being taken and, if appropriate, suggest precautions the consumer can take. A written notice--perhaps accompanying water bills--must be made if any part of the regulations is violated. In addition, whenever a specific health standard is not being attained, notice by newspaper and notification to radio and television stations is also required.

"We believe that most water supplies already meet the interim health standards," Blum said. "Those systems that aren't in full compliance, however, will now have to take whatever action is need to meet all the requirements contained in the regulations. This could include..."
installing more equipment at the treatment plant to remove the harmful substances. In severe cases, it may necessitate the water system finding a new source of water, or tying in to another nearby water system.

"Even though June 24 marks a turning point in the regulation of drinking water quality, it is really only the first step," Blum said. "We still have a long way to go, and many problems remain unsolved. The most notable of these is, of course, the widespread contamination of water supplies by small quantities of organic chemicals. With the exception of the six pesticides covered in the interim regulations, organics are not now subject to Federal regulation. Soon, that will change.

"Within the next several weeks, EPA will propose regulations to protect the public from chloroform and other organics of the trihalomethane group," Blum said. "This will represent the result of an intensive two-and-one-half year research effort. The new regulations will be augmented by additional regulatory initiatives as more information on sources, removal techniques and health effects becomes known."

Last Monday, June 20, EPA received the full report of a "drinking water and health" study prepared for the Agency over the past 18 months by the National Academy of Sciences. It examined the available data on the health effects of over 150 contaminant compounds. The NAS report was intended by Congress to advise EPA on additional regulatory actions.

The law provides for a system of variances and exemptions for individual water supplies. Thus a local water system may obtain an extension in compliance deadlines where serious economic or other problems are encountered. However, variances and exemptions may not be granted where there is an unreasonable risk to public health, and the public must be notified when they are granted.

"Congress intended the States to be the central figures in regulating the quality of drinking water," Blum said. "To do this, a State must assume primary enforcement responsibility (or "primacy") over its water supply systems, provided the program meets minimum national criteria. Should a State be unable or unwilling to do the job of enforcing the national standards, EPA must assume that responsibility.

"Alabama, Connecticut, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska and Oklahoma have already achieved primacy. Approval of the State programs of Arkansas, Georgia, New York and Virginia is expected shortly. It now appears that up to 30 States may assume primacy by the end of this year," Blum said. "We hope all the States will follow their lead."

To assist States in moving toward the assumption of primacy, EPA has dispersed $25 million to help set up and maintain adequate State programs. An additional $20.5 million will be available for Fiscal Year 1978, which begins on October 1 of this year.

Approximately 35 States have enacted new or revised drinking water legislation and 44 States have modified, or are in the process of modifying, their drinking water regulations. State expenditures for drinking water activities have increased by about $4.8 million (32 percent) since passage of the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1974.

EPA's drinking water program is carried out under the authority of the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act. It directs that the Agency's health regulations go into effect 18 months after they are issued in final form. The regulations appeared in the Federal Register 18 months ago on December 24, 1975.