

# THE FIGHT FOR HIGH QUALITY WATER

## What's The Problem With Our Current System?

Water pollution and contamination are widespread issues that impact billions around the world. This problem is so pervasive that the UN decreed in 2010 more people die from unsafe water than from all forms of violence, including war. While this is very much a global issue, it's important to recognize that the United States is not exempt from the water pollution crisis. Whether the source is polluted groundwater from unsustainable factory farming practices, aging water infrastructure, or the result of industrial mining practices, safe water is not available to all communities throughout the country. Harmful contaminants have been found in the tap water of every state across the country.

The deprioritization of water, broadly, and water infrastructure has dire impacts on the quality of water we use everyday. The Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC) research found that over 5,630 community water systems with over 23,000 health-based violations -the most severe violations- served almost 45 million people.

Low income and communities of color continue to see high levels of contaminants like lead and per-and polyfluorinated substances (or PFAS) in their drinking water, among others. One needs to look no further than the lead crisis in Flint, Michigan where residents of this majority Black city began noticing discolored and foul-tasting water in 2015. After the water was tested for contaminants it showed elevated levels of carcinogens due to its corrosive nature and the subsequent releasing of lead from city pipes into the community's water supply.

PFAS are often referred to as "forever chemicals" that are immune to degradation, regardless of environmental conditions. The prevalence of PFAS presents a huge risk to public health. Humans are exposed to PFAS via a large number of sources, including food (both homegrown and store-bought), food packaging, drinking water, the dust inside homes and more. As of 2016, PFAS had been detected in 194 of 4,864 surveyed public water supplies in the United States, potentially exposing 16.5 million people in 33 states<sup>6</sup>. New laboratory testing found that PFAS—per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances—are prevalent in the tap water of 43 American cities<sup>7</sup>. Environmental Working Group scientists now believe PFAS compounds are likely detectable in all major water supplies in the United States and that previous studies dramatically underestimated these toxins' pervasiveness<sup>8</sup>. Despite these risks, there are no current enforceable national standards for PFAS- leaving millions across the country at risk of continued exposure.

## What Impact Does This Have on our Communities?

Myriad factors have contributed to the water inequities facing low-income and BIPOC communities throughout the country, including racism in land use planning, little regulation of harmful industries and contaminants, a lack of funding from the federal government, and corporations' constant decision to choose profits over people.

For instance in Flint, MI residents are still grappling with the impacts of elevated lead exposure and Legionnaires disease, developmental delays<sup>9</sup>, and a marked decrease in fertility rates<sup>10</sup>. Flint's water supply was contaminated by an improperly treated water supply- the Flint River- —a decision made under the anti-democratic emergency management system as part of the austerity measures being imposed throughout the state<sup>11</sup>.

### Quick Facts



- Water is uniquely vulnerable to pollution because it is able to dissolve more substances than any other liquid on earth.
- The Environmental Protection Agency allows utilities to use a testing method that doesn't detect the highest concentrations of lead in pipes.
- Between June 2016 and May 2019 there were over 170,000 violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act in more than 24,000 communities throughout the country.
- Low income communities and communities of color (BIPOC) continue to see high levels of contaminants like lead and per-and polyfluorinated substances (or PFAs) in their drinking water, among others.

Emergency managers made the decision to switch the city's water supply, even with evidence of possible elevated lead levels, as a part of the austerity measures being employed throughout the state<sup>12</sup>. Then, private water corporation Veolia was contracted to study the water quality and make recommendations on how to improve it. Despite internal Veolia emails discussing the potential for lead in the water, Veolia failed to sound the alarm to the public. The decision cost the residents of Flint their health and public safety. Contaminated water can lead to extreme health effects, including cancer, developmental effects, compromised fertility, and nervous-system effects, and these risks are more dangerous to vulnerable populations, such as children and the elderly<sup>13</sup>.

Once released into the environment, PFAS chemicals do not break down, and due to characteristics such as their high water solubility and persistence, PFAS are mobile in soil, are prone to leaching into groundwater and can travel large distances<sup>14</sup>. When consumed in drinking water, PFAS accumulate in our bodies. PFAS exposure is responsible for cancer, birth defects, and other serious ailments, and is now present in over 98 percent of the U.S. population<sup>15</sup>. The EPA has not yet set any enforceable standard for PFAS under any of its various authorities.

And in Navajo Nation, where mining companies retrieved 4 million tons of uranium for the federal government to make atomic weapons over a 40 year period, a disproportionate amount of Navajo people have died from kidney failure and cancer linked to uranium contamination<sup>17</sup>. Further research from the Center for Disease Control shows uranium levels in babies born in Navajo Nation.

## How Do We Fight Back?

**We MUST Pass the WATER Act.** The WATER Act is the most comprehensive approach to improving our water systems and helping ensure that every person has access to safe and clean water in the United States. We need a major federal investment in our public water infrastructure to renovate our nation's old water pipes. The WATER Act will simultaneously deliver water justice to the millions of people in the United States who lack access to safe water, while creating nearly a million jobs.

**We MUST Ban Water Shutoffs Because of Inability to Pay.** Access to safe drinking water is critical in protecting public health. In the face of the Coronavirus, many cities and states issued moratoriums on water disconnection. Voluntary moratoriums are important, but mandatory moratoriums ensure every household has access to water - during and after the pandemic ends.

## Examples of EPA Water Quality Cuts<sup>16</sup>

### Safe and Sustainable Water Resources

  
**\$36MM CUT**

This research program is working to solve chemical and microbial contaminant problems in drinking water systems. SSWR research focuses on nutrients, harmful algal blooms, and water infrastructure.

### Public Water System Supervision

  
**\$34MM CUT**

This program – currently dramatically underfunded given the expectations for state agency effort – provides assistance to states and tribes to implement the Safe Drinking Water Act, including contaminant limits in treated water and reduction of lead at the tap.

### Underground Injection Control

  
**\$3.5MM CUT**

This Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) program protects underground sources of drinking water from activities such as the injection of oil and gas wastewater and other fluids into disposal and enhanced recovery wells, injection of uranium mining, and disposal of hazardous wastes.

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