

Issue: MI PFAS Contamination

Putting Michiganders at Risk: Lansing's Delinquent PFAS Contamination Response

PFAS: “Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a group of man-made chemicals that are very persistent in the environment and in the human body and can accumulate over time. There is evidence that exposure to PFAS can lead to adverse human health effects.” –EPA

PFAS are “...chemicals used globally during the past century in manufacturing, firefighting and thousands of common household and other consumer products. In recent years, experts have become increasingly concerned by the potential effects of high concentrations of PFAS on human health...” —Michigan government PFAS Response web page

January 2018, Plainfield Township: A 20-month-old baby is found to have 484,000 parts per trillion of PFAS—a likely carcinogen—in his blood. This is 100 times the blood level at which these chemicals become active in the body. Cause: leakage from a dump site containing chemicals used to waterproof shoes.

July 2018, Parchment and Cooper Township: A state of emergency is declared after concentrations of PFAS more than 20 times the Environmental Protection Agency's 'safe' level were detected. Residents are warned not to drink the water or cook with it. Suspected cause: leakage from a landfill containing chemicals used to manufacture coated papers.

August 2018, Oscoda: Veterans of the now-closed Wurtsmith Air Force Base wonder whether their cancers and auto-immune disorders are the result of drinking PFAS-contaminated water on base. Cause of contamination: toxic firefighting foams leaching into groundwater.

August 2018, Ann Arbor: With 85% of the city's drinking water coming from the PFAS-contaminated Huron River, funds are sought for improved filtration of the city's water supply. Cause of contamination: leakage of PFAS waste from an auto parts finishing company and possibly other businesses upstream in Wixom.

September 2018, From Oakland County to Lake Erie: A 5-county public health “Do Not Eat” warning is expanded to include all fish from the Huron River and its tributaries. It may be decades before fish from the Huron can be safely eaten.

While the infamous Flint water crisis is still under remediation, a new water contamination crisis is hitting communities throughout Michigan. And it's not as if state authorities didn't have plenty of warning.

In 2012, a detailed and specific alarm was sounded by a staff member of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) about a looming environmental and public health crisis from the toxic chemicals known collectively as PFAS. This 93-page report, which urged concerted, statewide action, was delivered to high-level officials at DEQ and yet was largely ignored for five years. Not until mid-November 2017, with a full-blown crisis upon the state, did Michigan finally establish a multi-agency task force to identify and address the effects of PFAS contamination in the state.

Human Exposure to PFAS Chemicals and Its Causes

The man-made chemicals known collectively as PFAS (PFOA and PFOS are the most studied of these) are not only toxic, but they degrade exceedingly slowly, so that they build up in the environment and accumulate in people's bodies. They have been associated with adverse effects on health including auto-immune disorders, thyroid and liver disease, pregnancy complications, and cancer. These chemicals have been in common use in certain firefighting foams as well as in the coatings used in food packaging, non-stick cookware, and stain-resistant carpeting and upholstery. However, the biggest source of human exposure to PFAS is through contaminated drinking water, a result of decades-long industrial and military uses of these chemicals.

Chemical brands such as Scotchgard, Teflon, Gore-Tex and STAINMASTER all contain PFAS. (Reformulations may have made these products less toxic, though no studies have shown this.) However, years of industrial use of such PFAS chemicals occurred in Michigan before their toxicity was widely known. Examples include the manufacture of coated paper products in Parchment, chrome finishing of auto parts in Wixom and Lapeer, and waterproofing of leather goods in Alpena and Rockport. In each case, PFAS waste from these businesses was disposed of at landfills or sewage plants from which the contamination spread to nearby land and water systems.

At military installations throughout the state, the primary source of PFAS contamination is the historic use of a class of firefighting foam known as AFFF. These sites include the former Wurtsmith Air Force Base in Oscoda, Alpena Combat Readiness Center, Battle Creek Air National Guard Base, Selfridge Air National Guard Base and Camp Grayling.

A reformulated form of AFFF is still in use at the Selfridge Air Base. AFFF is also still used in Michigan wildfire response and for training firefighters. Legal standards for the use, storage and disposal of this foam have yet to be established.

Michigan's Lackluster Response to Early Warnings

Despite the initial alarm sounded in 2012, prior to November 2017, Michigan authorities' response to PFAS contamination was piecemeal, consisting of investigation into contaminated sites as they were reported on. There was no proactive, concerted effort to ascertain the extent of contamination throughout the state and to remediate it. Democrats are currently calling for hearings to determine the cause of this inaction. Meanwhile, the discovery of extremely high levels of PFAS in wells near the former Wurtsmith Air Force Base in 2017 raised the profile of the issue, forcing the government's hand. On November 13, 2017, Governor Snyder finally took the action called for in 2012 when he created a multi-agency task force known as MPART, for Michigan PFAS Action and Response Team. MPART's main tasks are testing for and finding the sources of contamination, issuing health advisories, and remediation. Their website provides information about their findings and general information such as water filtration options (Michigan.gov/pfasresponse).

In addition to the 2012 alarm, a second alarm was ignored prior to the creation of MPART. In April 2017, a DEQ geologist urgently advocated for drinking water to be tested in a highly-polluted area southeast of the Wolverine tannery dump site in Belmont. For four months, DEQ higher-ups ignored this warning. When the testing was finally done, PFAS concentrations in

groundwater were found to be at extremely high levels, even higher than at the former Wurtsmith Air Force Base.

While Michigan authorities sat on their hands, contamination was spreading through the ground, water and air, affecting more than 11,300 potential sites throughout the state and putting increasing numbers of Michiganders—to say nothing of wildlife and the environment—at risk of serious harm.

Republicans in Lansing Stall on Setting Research-Based “Safe Level” for PFAS

Lansing Republicans, in control of the state government since 2010, not only neglected warnings about the looming PFAS threat for years, they are now refusing to take action to set an appropriate safe drinking water standard.

Last December, Democrat Winnie Brinks of Grand Rapids, along with six Democratic co-sponsors, introduced legislation to establish 5ppt (parts per trillion) as the standard for PFAS in Michigan’s drinking water. But the Republican-controlled House Natural Resources Committee has refused to even hold a hearing on this bill.

While Michigan’s DEQ did set an enforceable limit on PFAS drinking contamination in January 2018, they set the level far too high at 70ppt, mirroring the EPA’s ‘safe’ level advisory. The Federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) has released a study finding that the DEQ standard and EPA advisory are between 7 and 10 times too high, and research by a member of the Harvard Department of Public Health suggests setting the limit to 1 ppt because of the particularly serious health risks to children. In this light, the stalling by Republicans on the standard proposed last year by Democrats is indefensible.

Meanwhile, potentially hundreds of municipal drinking water supplies and numerous private wells throughout Michigan have levels of PFAS that—though deemed safe by the DEQ—may not in fact be safe. If the state won’t enforce a standard of drinking water quality recommended by scientific study, what are Michiganders supposed to do? As the Michigan Environmental Council states,

“Only when we set [a meaningful, science-based] standard can Michigan begin to truly regulate and monitor the amount of PFAS in our drinking water and protect our health.”

Republican Mismanagement and Incompetence

Inaction in the face of major warnings and refusal to set a meaningful drinking water standard aren’t the only ways in which Michigan Republicans have been delinquent on the state’s PFAS contamination problem. There are at least two other examples of mismanagement and incompetence on this issue in Lansing:

- **More mismanagement regarding Flint’s drinking water:** In 2013, high levels of PFAS were found at two sites in the Flint River. Though the Snyder administration knew of this, Flint’s drinking water supply was still allowed to be switched to the Flint River in 2014. This measure, taken to save money, resulted in the Flint water crisis due to other contaminants, primarily lead.
- **Republicans gave corporations oversight at DEQ:** In June 2018, Governor Snyder enacted Republican legislation that puts corporate representatives on a new DEQ oversight board.

Should the producers and industrial users of toxic chemicals really be regulating themselves?

Summary / Conclusion

Governor Snyder likes to boast that Michigan's multi-agency task force MPART, assigned with investigating and remediating PFAS contamination, is a model for other states also dealing with the problem. What he does not say is this:

- While Michigan authorities ignored multiple warnings about PFAS, contamination continued to spread through the water, ground, and air, increasing Michiganders' exposure to these toxic chemicals.
- Following on the heels of the Flint water crisis, which is still not completely resolved, Michigan's PFAS contamination problems are yet another example of Republican mismanagement and incompetence, representing a betrayal of the public trust.
- As word spreads of contamination to the Great Lakes—which contain one fifth of the world's freshwater—and across Michigan, the state's identity as a land of great natural beauty will continue to suffer, and the tourism industry's successful "Pure Michigan" campaign will become less and less credible.
- Environmental groups have consistently endorsed Democrats as stewards of the environment. With Michigan Republicans' handling of the PFAS contamination issue, is it any wonder why?
- While Republicans in Lansing refuse to take action to set a meaningful standard for PFAS in drinking water, states like New Jersey, Minnesota, and Vermont have already set enforceable drinking water limits for PFAS that are well below the 70ppt level set by Michigan's DEQ. By not setting an appropriate research-based drinking water standard, the Republican-controlled government in Lansing is failing to perform its duty to protect the public health.

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