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Wisconsin health agency recommends groundwater standards for 18 PFAS

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) is recommending that its environment department set groundwater quality standards for 18 per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) that currently are unregulated, including calling for a combined enforcement standard for six of the chemicals.

The recommendation to set an enforcement groundwater standard of 20 parts per trillion (ppt) for a combined six PFAS echoes Massachusetts' recent move to finalize a single drinking water standard for a group of six PFAS in order to provide greater protection to sensitive subgroups of people.

With recommendations for 18 PFAS groundwater quality standards, Wisconsin's effort appears to be one of the first among states to move ahead on such a large group of PFAS. A handful of states have moved out on finalizing drinking water and groundwater standards for PFAS -- often setting them for two to six of the chemicals.

The DHS says Wisconsin's groundwater quality standards apply to regulated facilities that affect groundwater, including application to contaminated site cleanups, regulation of solid waste landfills, bottled water and approved agricultural chemicals. Even in the interim, before the recommendations become standards, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) can apply the new numbers to site-specific remediation goals, says a source with Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger (CSWAB), an environmental group that has pushed for the standards.

Environmentalists are applauding Wisconsin's recommendations, but also are urging the state's DNR to order public water systems to test for PFAS.

Also, CSWAB says with the new health-based guidelines in hand from the health department, "it now falls to the state legislature to secure resources for long-overdue testing of Wisconsin's public drinking water systems."

CSWAB and 33 other environmental and public health groups in October wrote to DNR urging it to order public water systems to test for PFAS, in order to find out if drinking water supplies are contaminated.

The group notes in a Nov. 9 press release that many public water utilities have so far resisted voluntary testing for PFAS, fearing added costs. Fewer than 100 of the 11,000 public drinking water systems have been tested for the chemicals, it says.

The DHS Nov. 6 made recommendations for groundwater quality standards governing 12 individual PFAS, as well as a combined enforcement standard for six PFAS at 20 ppt. These six are perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS), perfluorooctane sulfonamide (FOSA), N-ethyl perfluorooctane sulfonamide (NEtFOSA), N-ethyl perfluorooctane sulfonamidoacetic acid (NEtFOSAA) and N-ethyl perfluorooctane sulfonamidoethanol (NEtFOSE).

"These recommendations demonstrate our ongoing commitment to ensuring clean, safe drinking water for Wisconsin residents," said DHS Deputy Secretary Julie Willems Van Dijk in a Nov. 6 press release. "With this essential information in hand, we continue our vital work to protect this precious resource."

On its website, DHS says that in the coming months, DNR will start rulemaking procedures to adopt the recommendations.

"With these recommendations, the DNR will continue to make progress on ensuring clean drinking water for all Wisconsinites," said Darsi Foss, Environmental Management Division Administrator for the DNR, in the release.

“We look forward to involving the public in the scientifically rigorous review of available technical information that will ensue within the rulemaking process.”

The recommendations grew out of a 2018 petition from CSWAB asking the DNR to set health advisory levels for summed-total concentrations of all PFAS, including precursors, that threaten groundwater, CSWAB says. DNR granted the petition in 2019, adding 26 PFAS to its list of priority contaminants needing regulation, it says.

While DHS previously recommended a combined groundwater quality standard for PFOA and PFOS, health officials now say “scientific evidence shows that the four additional compounds [under the combined standard recommendation] tend to transform into PFOA and PFOS in the environment and into PFOS in the human body,” CSWAB says.