

E.P.A. Says It Will Tackle ‘Forever Chemicals.’ Details Are Sparse.

A new proposal to combat PFAS contamination, announced by the Environmental Protection Agency, left critical questions unanswered.

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The Trump administration announced a flurry of measures to target PFAS contamination, but it stayed mum on whether it intends to uphold a Biden-era rule requiring utilities to remove the “forever chemicals” from the tap water of hundreds of millions of Americans.

“I have long been concerned about PFAS and the efforts to help states and communities dealing with legacy contamination in their backyards,” said Lee Zeldin, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, in a statement. “This is just a start of the work we will do on PFAS to ensure Americans have the cleanest air, land, and water.”

PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are a class of chemicals linked to cancer and other diseases and are used widely in everyday products such as waterproof clothing and [paper straws](#). The chemicals, which don’t break down easily in the environment, are also present in drinking water nationwide. According to the latest data from the E.P.A., [as many as 158 million Americans](#) have PFAS in their water.

Last year, President Joseph R. Biden Jr. set the first limits on PFAS in drinking water. The rules effectively require municipal water systems to remove certain kinds of PFAS.

But water utilities and chemical-industry groups filed suit saying the drinking water standards would be too costly. The Trump administration faces a May 12 deadline to decide whether to continue to defend the standards in court.

On Monday, the E.P.A. announced measures to tackle PFAS contamination, including designating an official to lead the agency’s efforts on the chemicals, creating guidelines for how much PFAS factories could release in their wastewater, and engaging with Congress to come up with ways to hold polluters responsible.

The E.P.A. also said it would determine a path forward to address PFAS contamination of fertilizer made from sewage sludge. Concerns have been growing over widespread [contamination of American farmland](#) from sludge fertilizer, also known as biosolids, containing dangerous levels of PFAS.

Environmental groups said the E.P.A.'s plans lacked specifics, including whether the agency intended to defend the Biden-era drinking water standards in court. Among the only hints on what the Trump administration might do was a mention of the need to address "compliance challenges."

The Trump administration also faces a court deadline next month on whether it will continue to defend the designation of two types of PFAS as [hazardous chemicals that must be cleaned up](#) by polluters under the nation's Superfund law, a measure also enacted by President Biden.

"The key things that we actually want a direct answer on, they completely punt," said Erik D. Olson, a senior strategist on drinking water and health at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group.

The E.P.A. also said that it will rely on science, Mr. Olson said, but does not mention that the agency [plans to eliminate its scientific research arm](#) and cut the overall agency budget [by 65 percent](#). "On one hand, the E.P.A. says it's going to do all this new work. But it's also going to slash the budget and eliminate the scientists that would be responsible for doing the work," he said. "I don't see how this adds up."

The E.P.A. [has also been cutting research grants](#) to scientists studying how to prevent PFAS from accumulating in crops and the food chain.

In a statement, an E.P.A. official said the agency was in the process of reviewing the Biden administration's drinking water standards. The agency official did not comment on how the E.P.A. would proceed with the Superfund policy.

Industry groups suing the agency over PFAS, including the American Water Works Association and National Association of Manufacturers, did not provide immediate comment.

James L. Ferraro, an environmental attorney who represents several water utilities, said E.P.A.'s announcement "signals that the agency is mindful of the cost burdens PFAS regulations may impose, not just on industry, but also on public water systems." Still the new measures felt "very preliminary," he said. "We'll see how this unfolds."

The E.P.A.'s announcement of steps to tackle PFAS comes as the administration is pursuing a broad effort to roll back [the nation's climate and environmental regulations](#). Still, polls have consistently shown that, compared to policies to tackle climate change, protecting clean water [is popular regardless of politics](#).

Even the White House has raised the alarm on PFAS, albeit in [action against paper straws](#), saying that "scientists and regulators have had substantial concerns about PFAS chemicals for decades."