

EPA InSight POLICY PAPER

This supplement to EPA InSight contains up-to-date policy information from the Administrator/Deputy Administrator to all EPA employees.

SAFE DRINKING WATER - A NATIONAL PRIORITY

September 1993

R-17J
EPA-175-N-93-023 ✓

Below is a speech from Administrator Carol Browner to the National Association of Towns and Townships, September 8, 1993:

Good afternoon. I'm happy to be a guest of this organization at the forefront of environmental protection. It's a pleasure to address this group of dedicated public servants, and it's my special pleasure to welcome you all to Washington....

The American people asked for change in the last election, and the Clinton administration is taking on a lot of big issues--from reducing the deficit to reinventing the government....

This is what we're talking about today: **this glass of water**--my ability to pick up a glass of water anywhere in American and trust that it's safe to drink.

That's what the **Safe Drinking Water Act** is all about. But, we have a problem. The way we guarantee safe water for the American people is broken and it needs to be fixed.

When you turn on your faucet, you have a right to safe water to drink, and brush your teeth, and make your coffee, and wash the dishes, and give your kids a bath.

I don't care whether you live in New York City or in the smallest community in the country, whether you get your water from a big urban system or from a tiny trailer park. Every American has a right to the safest water in the world, the highest quality available on this earth.

A safe, clean water supply is an absolutely critical aspect of public health, a vital part of our quality of life.

But, look what's been happening...Thousands of people in Milwaukee got sick from the parasite that invaded their water supply...People in New York City had to boil their tap water or use expensive bottled water this summer...The terrible flood in the Midwest deprived hundreds of communities of drinking water.

All over America, communities are struggling to deal with the pollution that threatens their water supply. The bacteria, parasites, industrial solvents, pesticides, lead, and chlorine byproducts in our water carry risks of cancer, nervous system disorders, liver and kidney damage, and gastro-intestinal distress.

In the face of these problems, the regulatory burden on water systems is growing--and many American communities can't keep up. Remember that, of our nation's 200,000 water systems, the great majority serve under a thousand people. You know as well as I do that many of these small systems are in trouble.

For many of you in this room, this means a big headache--or perhaps, even a touch of gastro-intestinal distress....

But, our proposal for reforming the **Safe Drinking Water Act** is designed to spell relief--because we've heard your concerns about the Safe Drinking Water Act and we've come up with a package that addresses them.

Our proposals are based on **two principles**:

- The first principle is **pollution prevention**. We need to stop pollution before it starts--to prevent environmental damage, not just clean it up after the fact.

- The second principle is that we need to be absolutely uncompromising about the **goals** of environmental protection--but, at the same time, we need to incorporate more flexibility, more local and regional decision-making, in how we **reach** those goals.

I'm going to describe three things: **first**, the changes we're proposing to Congress; **second**, the administrative measures that EPA is implementing on its own; and, **finally**, I'll describe what I need from **you**.

Later this year, Congress will take up the reauthorization of the Safe Drinking Water Act. EPA has worked hard to understand the problems facing communities across this country. I look forward to presenting our recommendations to Congress and working with the Members of Congress who have been strong leaders in the effort to guarantee safe drinking water for all Americans.

I want to outline for you now the reforms that we're recommending to Congress. These changes are designed to help small communities to do the best possible job of protecting public health. And, by the way, they reflect many of the principles of "reinventing government" that the President and Vice President talked about yesterday.

Number 1 is a **State Revolving Fund**, which would grant loans to local water systems to help them comply with the law. **President Clinton** has proposed to have the federal government contribute \$600 million to the fund next year and \$1 billion each for the next four years. That's good news, isn't it?

Number 2 is a **fee** that states could use to raise additional money to oversee drinking water quality and help small communities.

Number 3--and this is very important--is a program to **prevent contaminants from getting into the drinking water supply in the first place**. Think about it. Instead of spending all our energy testing the water and finding the contaminants and then trying to take them out of our water supply, doesn't it make sense to focus on the front end, too?

To look at where our drinking water comes from, identify where the contaminants are going in, and take steps to keep them out?

Number 4, we're also going to reward those communities that make the upfront investment to prevent contaminants from entering their water supply. Communities that adopt enhanced pollution prevention programs won't be required to do as much monitoring and treatment. It's a common-sense solution.

Number 5: Let's work with small systems, not against them. What do we do when some of these tiny systems that serve a few dozen households can't afford to screen for six different contaminants? We want to work with the states to either consolidate these tiny systems or get them to share resources in new ways.

Number 6: We want to allow the small systems, so strapped for funds, to choose less expensive technologies. EPA wants to provide information to these small systems to help them find these cheaper technologies and use them.

Again, matters of common sense that will help solve a lot of problems.

Number 7 is **operator training and certification**. This is something most states already do, but not always for the smallest systems. We want to make sure that properly-trained, qualified personnel operate all drinking water systems, no matter how small.

Number 8: We want to make sure that our resources and your resources are going to deal with the contaminants that are the most serious. Currently, seven dozen contaminants are already regulated, and the Safe Drinking Water Act requires EPA to set standards for 25 new contaminants every three years. We don't think this specific numeric requirement is in anyone's best interest. Instead, we're proposing that EPA would draw up a list of contaminants divided into two groups: one, those that should be regulated, and, two, those that we still need to study. This would get us off the treadmill of regulating for the sake of regulating, and restore purpose and balance to our actions.

Number 9 would give water systems more time to comply with new regulations. Right now, the law gives you only 18 months to come into compliance, even if the new rules are very complex or require expensive equipment. A lot of small systems have found this 18-month deadline to be a hardship. So, in response, we're proposing to be more flexible and allow some systems up to 60 months to reach compliance.

The last recommendation, **Number 10**, would make the Safe Drinking Water Act enforcement component consistent with other environmental statutes. We'd put some teeth into the ban against using lead in plumbing pipes, so that

we could protect people, especially children, from this dangerous hazard.

Now, let me very briefly describe a couple of things that EPA is already doing on our own....

First, we're helping states to participate in the waiver program for water sampling. It's my job not only to administer nationwide policies, but also to take account of regional differences. Through the waiver program, EPA gives a state the authority to waive the sampling requirements in particular communities. For example, you may not have to test for a particular pesticide if that pesticide is never used in your area.

The savings you can achieve are truly extraordinary. We've just compiled this information for the first time. Listen to this: MASSACHUSETTS expects to save its water systems \$12-and-a-half million out of \$30 million in chemical monitoring costs over the next two years. MINNESOTA expects to save \$18 million out of \$32 million. MISSOURI expects to save \$18-and-a-half million out of \$24 million. And the list goes on.

If your state hasn't already invested in the waiver program, ask them to look into it. It's a proven mechanism to reduce monitoring costs in cases where you're sure that spending more money won't yield more benefits for public health.

Another thing we're offering is our pocket sampling guide for operators of small water systems. It's written in plain English (and) it's really easy to use....

Finally, let me describe what I need from you. I know you all have loud voices. I need you to make your voices heard loud and clear on Capitol Hill. There's nothing more persuasive for a Member of Congress than hearing directly from you how laws that they pass affect their community, your community. You know better than anyone else about the problems with the Safe Drinking Water Act, and how these proposed changes could make it better. You and I need to work together to make the Safe Drinking Water Act provide the strongest and most effective protection for all Americans, in communities large and small.

In conclusion, let's remember that, while the issues are big, the American people experience these issues on a much smaller scale. Millions of Americans live in small communities like yours. Small communities are where a common concern for the future takes root. In this way, small communities are the key to the future we build for our children and our children's children.

Your job as public officials in small communities is a vital building block of environmental protection. It's critical to the future of our nation...I look forward to working with you to protect the American public and our environment. Thank you.

This Policy Paper is available on Email: type VTK at the Email menu; press 2 (News/Net) and Enter; then, press 4 and Enter.