

U.S. EPA to readdress perchlorate limits in drinking water

"The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will reconsider setting a maximum drinking water standard for perchlorate, a chemical used in rocket fuel, fireworks, military explosives and highway flares.

That's good news to the New Mexico Environment Department, which believes perchlorate levels in the state's groundwater are a potential health hazard.

Perchlorate has been found in groundwater monitoring wells at Los Alamos National Laboratory, Sandia National Laboratories, and the White Sands Missile Range. The chemical has been found in or near drinking water wells at Kirtland Air Force Base, the Melrose Bombing Range near Clovis and Cannon Air Force Base.

The EPA made a preliminary decision last year not to regulate the chemical in water.

New EPA administrator Lisa P. Jackson in Washington, D.C., said Wednesday the agency is seeking public comment on the EPA's re-evaluation of scientific information on perchlorate in drinking water. She directed staff to evaluate, in particular, the impact of perchlorate on infants and young children, who drink more water by body weight than adults.

Perchlorate contamination, like uranium, can occur from both natural and man-made sources. The chemical decreases iodide uptake and decreases thyroid hormone levels in sensitive populations such as pregnant women, infants and children, according to university studies and research by the Centers for Disease Control.

Last year, New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry sent a letter to then-EPA administrator Stephen L. Johnson, asking the agency to establish a maximum level of perchlorate allowed in groundwater. Without the standard, there's no requirement for drinking water facilities to test for the chemical.

"In the department's view, perchlorate contamination in drinking water occurs at levels and at a frequency that is a public health concern in New Mexico," Curry wrote.

While there is no set federal or state perchlorate standards for drinking water, the EPA issued an interim drinking water advisory in January. The advisory established 15 micrograms of perchlorate per liter as the level at which public health officials and hazardous waste cleanup officials should consider health effects.

Sampling at Los Alamos National Laboratory found perchlorate levels ranging from 30 micrograms per liter to 256 micrograms per liter in groundwater monitoring wells, according to a May 2005 report by the Government Accountability Office.

Unlike other places in the state, LANL does have to test for perchlorate under a 2005 agreement with the state Environment Department. "LANL recognizes that perchlorate in general is a potential health risk," said Fred deSousa, a communications specialist with the lab. "We test for perchlorate in groundwater directly from drinking water supply wells and from nearby monitoring wells. We have not seen levels in the Los Alamos drinking water aquifer that indicate a health risk exists."

DeSousa said LANL helped develop an improved method for detecting low levels of perchlorate in water that has been adopted by EPA.

One monitoring well at Sandia National Laboratories showed levels from 680 micrograms per liter to 4,300 micrograms per liter.

An active drinking water well at the Melrose Bombing Range near Clovis had perchlorate levels of 30 to 40 micrograms per liter in 2001, a five microgram increase from two years prior.

The EPA received more than 32,000 comments from individuals and organizations over its decision not to set a maximum safe drinking water standard for perchlorate in 2008.

For more information on how and when to comment on the perchlorate issue, see epa.gov/safewater/contaminants/unregulated/perchlorate.html

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