

State proposes new limits on toxic PFAS chemicals

By [Ethan Genter](#)

14 December 2019

Tougher standards would apply to drinking water, contaminated site cleanups.

BOSTON — After pondering restrictions on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances for most of the year, the Baker-Polito administration on Friday filed draft regulations that would establish enforceable standards on public drinking water systems.

The Department of Environmental Protection also finalized standards for sites that have soil and groundwater contaminated from the chemicals, commonly called PFAS.

“It’s a step forward,” Martin Suuberg, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection, said of the proposed tighter standards.

There are currently no federal standards for PFAS in drinking water. To date, Massachusetts and most other states simply rely on the federal “lifetime health advisory standard” of 70 parts per trillion

The state’s proposed standards would reduce the benchmark for PFAS contamination to a 20 parts per trillion enforceable standard.

The proposed standard would be the combined limit for six PFAS compounds.

The regulations also would require public water suppliers to regularly test for PFAS and act when the water goes above the limit.

If approved, Massachusetts’ regulations would cover more compounds than any other state, according to the administration.

In recent years, the public drinking water supplies in Mashpee and Hyannis have been contaminated with the chemicals, which can be found in a range of products ranging from nonstick cookware to firefighting foams.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the list of possible health effects from PFAS includes impact on growth, learning and behavior in infants and older children; reduced fertility; interference with the body’s natural hormones; weakened immune system; increased cholesterol levels; and risk of cancer.

PFAS also has been found in groundwater and soil at Barnstable Municipal Airport and Martha’s Vineyard Airport and at Joint Base Cape Cod, from which it has migrated to surrounding communities.

Massachusetts is one of only two states that have finalized standards for soil and groundwater cleanup of PFAS from contaminated sites. The standards require parties that are responsible for the contamination to

clean groundwater that could be used as drinking water to meet the 20 parts per trillion standard for six compounds.

“The cleanup rules announced today are designed to protect public health wherever contamination is found and provides clear guidance on what is needed to address contamination,” Energy and Environment Secretary Kathleen Theoharides said in a statement

The steps taken Friday drew local praise as well.

“This is a significant move forward in providing public health protection to ensure that fewer people are exposed to the PFAS family of compounds in their drinking water,” said Andrew Gottlieb, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod.

Concern over PFAS contamination, and the lack of hard standards, has increased significantly, particularly where contamination is known.

Water superintendents in some Cape towns already have begun testing for PFAS. Robert Prophett, water superintendent for the Bourne Water District, tested in December 2018 for the six PFAS compounds the state has targeted in the draft regulations. “The level was undetectable for all six,” he said. He also tested last month, but those results are not yet in.

Proactive measures also have been taken in Hyannis and Mashpee.

In Mashpee, contamination in municipal wells has been traced to Joint Base Cape Cod. Sources include the firefighting training area, where a plume has been traveling off the base via the groundwater in a southeasterly direction into Mashpee and Falmouth. Base officials have been tracking its path since 2016.

In Mashpee, the base connected 11 individual residences and 93 units in Lakeside Estates to municipal water because of PFAS levels, based on the federal 70 parts per trillion advisory.

The base also paid to have a filter installed on the Mashpee Village water supply well.

“We’ve been waiting for it,” Mashpee Water District Superintendent Andrew Marks said of the filing of draft regulations.

Marks shut down a second municipal drinking well off Old Barnstable Road earlier this year.

“We had a well site between the 20 ppt and 70 ppt level,” he said. “We could have continued to operate that well, but in the interest of public health, we chose to take that pumping station offline.”

Marks is optimistic that if the state adopts the new regulations as part of the Massachusetts Contingency Plan, it will provide an opportunity for the town to receive federal funding to buy the filtering system required to get wells back online.

But whether the federal Department of Defense will pay for cleanup and filter systems if PFAS levels exceed the state standard but still meet the more lenient federal guidelines remains unclear.

“Our Air Force policy has to look at PFOS and PFOA and compare our results to the (federal) lifetime health advisory,” said Rose Forbes, Air Force Remediation Program manager at the base. “What we have to do now is have Air Force management look at the process, look at the assumptions and review all the calculations the state used (for the new standard) and decide.”

The fiscal 2019 supplemental budget approved by the Legislature earlier this week included \$4.2 million for testing of PFAS contamination of water supplies and grants to support treatment and design of affected drinking water systems. It also included a nearly \$20 million operating transfer to the Massachusetts Clean Water Trust to support drinking water programs to remediate PFAS contamination of public water supplies, including no-interest loans.

The Department of Environmental Protection will hold five hearings on the regulations across the state to give the public a chance to comment. No hearings are scheduled on the Cape. The closest forum will be Jan. 8 at the department’s Southeast Regional Office in Lakeville.

Comments on the draft regulations are being accepted until Feb. 28.

To submit comments

Written comments on the state’s draft PFAS regulations will be accepted until 5 p.m. Feb. 28.

Emails are preferred and may be sent to program.director-dwp@mass.gov and should include “PFAS MCL Comments” in the subject line.

Postal Service mail may be sent to Attn: PFAS MCL Comment, MassDEP, Drinking Water Program, 1 Winter St., 5th Floor, Boston, MA 02108.

All submissions must include the name and contact information of the person providing the comments.