

EPA Lax in Collecting Water Data, Study Finds

By David Nakamura
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, January 26, 2006; B05

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been slow to force states to collect and report required data on lead levels in drinking water and has little information on schools and child-care facilities, according to a study being released today.

The Government Accountability Office study was launched two years ago after reports of significant lead contamination of the District's drinking water. The study found that the EPA's database does not include recent test results on more than 30 percent of community water systems and lacks some data on more than 70 percent. The problems in data collection "may be undermining the intended level of public health protection," the GAO said.

The GAO recommended that the "EPA take steps to ensure that data on key aspects of lead rule implementation are timely and complete so that the agency is better able to assess the effectiveness of the rule and state oversight and enforcement efforts."

Benjamin H. Grumbles, who oversees the EPA's Office of Water, said through a spokeswoman yesterday that the federal Lead and Copper Rule has been effective in keeping lead levels below federal limits in 96 percent of the nation's large water systems. The agency has issued comprehensive new guidance for protecting against lead in schools and is in the final stages of issuing proposed changes to the federal rule, Grumbles said.

In the District, lead levels that exceeded the federal limit were found in thousands of homes in 2003, but the results were not fully disclosed to the public until a news story appeared in The Washington Post in January 2004. In the wake of widespread concern, the D.C. Water and Sewer Authority, the District's health department, the Washington Aqueduct and the EPA began a massive campaign to fix the problem and protect the public.

This month, WASA announced that lead levels in the District's drinking water had subsided to below the federal limit for a full year.

The GAO study found that lead levels in drinking water have generally declined significantly since the early 1990s, when the federal Lead and Copper Rule was strengthened. But Sen. James M. Jeffords (I-Vt.), one of three congressmen to request the GAO study, said the EPA needed to continue to improve its oversight and implementation.

"Safe drinking water is not a privilege, it is a right," Jeffords said in a written statement yesterday. "This GAO report confirms that there are large holes in federal safe drinking

water regulations, the same ones I have sought to address since we learned of D.C.'s water problems. The EPA has failed to act in a meaningful way to plug these gaps, even after the drinking water in the nation's capital was 'off-limits' for months."

Jeffords has offered legislation that would change federal law and create stricter oversight, but the legislation has not received widespread support in Congress.

The GAO recommended that the EPA collect more information on the water in schools and child-care facilities, few of which test for lead, according to the findings. Children under 6 are at the highest risk of lead poisoning, although in the District's case, there have not been findings of health problems related to drinking water.

Of school districts, the GAO report said: "Little information exists on the pervasiveness of the problem nationwide because no focal point exists at the national or state level to collect and analyze the test results or share information on effective remediation strategies."

© 2006 The Washington Post Company