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The Next Water Crisis

Last March more than 370,000 people became sick after Milwaukee's water supply was contaminated with an intestinal parasite thought to originate in animal waste or human sewage. Forty people died, and many are still seriously ill. A senior EPA official conceded that "what happened in Milwaukee is likely to happen again, but I can't predict where."

More recently the metropolitan Washington area received its own wake-up call when residents of the city and some surrounding areas had to boil their water because of a threat of contamination. Here and across our nation, the message is clear: Safe drinking water can no longer be taken for granted.

Like most cities, Washington relies for its water supply on surface water (e.g., the Potomac River) that is vulnerable to contamination from animal waste, pesticide runoff, organic chemicals and, on occasion, human sewage. Also like most cities, the capital has an aging water distribution system with antiquated treatment facilities.

An additional shortcoming is that drinking water treatment plants are operated by inadequately trained staffs with minimal oversight. This is true in Washington, where the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency oversees operation of the water system, and elsewhere, where states have oversight responsibility.

This city's water supply system includes more than 26,000 old service lines that slowly leach lead into our water supplies and elevate contamination levels to well above the EPA action level.

Another problem is contamination from byproducts of the disinfection process, such as chloroform. Researchers have associated these drinking water contaminants with more than 10,000

cancer cases each year. D.C.'s water has especially high levels during summer months.

The problem that been most widely publicized is microbial contamination. Several times in recent months fecal coliform, a microbial contaminant usually associated with sewage, has been found in local tap water. It was the threat of another microbial contaminant, the Milwaukee intestinal parasite *Cryptosporidium*, that prompted December's order to boil water.

The similarities between the deficiencies in water safety in Washington and those found to contribute to Milwaukee's problem are startling. Both systems are vulnerable to source water contamination. Both rely on an antiquated sand filter system. Both are operated by inadequately trained personnel. Both are subject to little meaningful oversight. And, incredibly, both cities routinely return contaminants caught by filters to the original source water, where they can build up to overwhelm the filter and pose a threat of re-entering the drinking water.

The problems plaguing drinking water systems across the country must be addressed by Congress in the continuing effort to amend the Safe Drinking Water Act if we are to ensure that such episodes are not repeated.

Public attention to the congressional debate is especially crucial because the drinking water supply industry has launched a campaign in recent months to roll back the law's health protection standards. These water suppliers, many of which are municipalities, argue that even the current standards for water quality are "unfunded mandates" and should be weakened.

I take a different view. One of the

most fundamental responsibilities of government is to provide safe drinking water to all Americans, regardless of whether the water supplier is a private company or a local government.

Congress shouldn't weaken vitally important health standards, but it should pass legislation that will provide for more financial and technical assistance to water suppliers, ensure better training for system operators, streamline the law's requirements, and guarantee more effective oversight. The Clinton administration has endorsed such an approach and secured a 1994 budget that includes a major new funding program to help water systems meet drinking water standards.

Unfortunately, the president's initiative has been undermined by extremists in the drinking water supply industry. Despite this year's problems, they stubbornly insist that the law's health standards are the problem and should be rolled back. Their rhetoric on unfunded mandates may sound populist, but their ideological intransigence ignores public safety and will only lead to a legislative stalemate.

The unpleasant truth is that the water systems in Milwaukee and Washington, with all their problems, are typical of systems in big cities across the nation. In small towns and rural areas, the situation is even worse.

The president has sought to respond to this growing problem with an approach that will reduce the burden on water suppliers and provide greater public confidence in our drinking water.

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WASHINGTON POST

1/19/91