



Drinking Water Safety Issues In the Headlines

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In recent weeks and months, a very serious and alarming situation involving health risks of the community's drinking water supply in Flint, Michigan has been making headlines, even becoming a topic in the presidential primaries. Lead levels in the Flint system have been measured as high as 4,000 parts per billion (ppb) while the US EPA's "action level" is 15 ppb, a point at which the system is supposed to inform the public of steps they should take to protect their health. Exposure to lead is dangerous for all of us, but for children, it is especially damaging because it can permanently affect their development. There is no level of lead in water that is considered safe.

The chain of events that led to the current water crisis in the City of Flint, with nearly 100,000 residents, began with a decision to switch to a water source that officials thought would save the cash-strapped city money. Other factors that contributed to the crisis include old lead pipes remaining in parts of the system, certain characteristics of the new water source that caused pipe corrosion and enabled the lead to leach into the water, and what seems to be a series of missteps and attempts by state officials to minimize the public's concern about the problem. The dismissal of the seriousness of the problem was pretty clearly not based on science or a careful analysis of the facts. What has resulted is a deep mistrust on the part of the public regarding whether the water supply can be made safe again. It seems likely that there will be enduring suspicion and uncertainty in Flint about whether statements by city and state agencies and elected officials can be trusted.

A different contamination issue involving a smaller public water supply serving the Village of Hoosick Falls in Rensselaer County, New York – part of the Hudson River Watershed - has also emerged in recent weeks. In this case, the contaminant of concern is called PFOA, or perfluorooctanoic acid, which was detected in the village's municipal wells. New York State's Department of Health and Department of Environmental Conservation, at the direction of Governor Cuomo, took action last week to declare this substance hazardous and use the state's Superfund program and other steps to protect public health. This situation is rapidly evolving, and it is not yet clear how serious the risk is to residents. As it unfolds, we may see similarities between these two cases in Flint and Hoosick Falls in terms of their longer-term impact on the public perception of the safety of their community water supply.

Beginning with our 2015 Annual Watershed Conference, the Hudson River Watershed Alliance has been focusing on drinking water as a priority water resource issue in the region. In addition to issues regarding safety of public water supplies and individual home wells, we are interested in addressing funding shortfalls for the maintenance of community water systems and the public's perception of tap water versus bottled water. Americans spend many billions of dollars each year on bottled water. In many cases, consumers who are buying this water have tap water from their community supply or home well that is safe – and government safety standards and testing requirements for bottled water are significantly weaker than for tap water. These

cases in Flint and Hoosick Falls show the importance of both consumer awareness and the public trust in making our public drinking supply system work effectively, along with responsiveness and leadership from water suppliers and municipal, state and federal officials. At a time when many water systems in the US are in need of major upgrades and repairs and there is not enough funding to cover these needs, we need to consider important policy and education issues affecting how we allocate funding to maintain our public water supply systems, how to continue to build public awareness, and the importance of educated consumers in ensuring effective management of our water supplies.

In upcoming Hudson River Watershed Alliance events, we will examine in more depth the quality and safety of our regional water supplies, how watershed groups and other stakeholders can work together to protect water at the source and keep it clean and safe as it is delivered to consumers, and how consumers can become more educated about their drinking water choices and their community water supplies. Our goal is that we continue this critical regional dialogue on drinking water protection, and over the long term, support a public drinking water system on which residents in the Hudson Valley can rely.

Additional Resources:

- [New York Times article - Water Pollution in Hoosick Falls Prompts Action by New York State](#)
- [NYS DOH Investigation on Hoosick Falls](#)
- [EPA Page on Hoosick Falls](#)
- [Village of Hoosick Falls Water Information Page](#)
- [Another case in the New York Times Magazine involving PFOA](#)
- [Environmental Working Group blog article on PFOA](#)
- [EPA fact sheet on PFOS and PFOA](#)
- [NYS DOH Drinking Water Program](#)
- [US EPA Ground Water and Drinking Water](#)
- [US EPA Source Water Protection](#)

This article was prepared by Simon Gruber and Maureen Cunningham of the Hudson River Watershed Alliance. The Hoosick River Watershed Association – who happens to be our Watershed of the Month this February - was not involved in developing this article about the drinking water issues in Flint, Michigan and Hoosick Falls, New York.