

Lead contamination of water supply in US capital

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Tens of thousands of residents of Washington, DC, have been drinking water with lead levels as much as 40 times the maximum set under US health standards, officials of the city's Water and Sewer Authority (WASA) have admitted.

The contamination is the worst ever seen in a major urban water system, federal water quality officials told a congressional hearing earlier this month. Benjamin H. Grumbles, the acting EPA assistant administrator for water, said that higher lead levels had been found only in toxic waste dumps covered by the federal Superfund cleanup program.

More than 600 children in the District of Columbia have been given blood tests since in the last few weeks. They had an average blood lead level 47 percent higher than the national average, 2.8 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, compared to the 1.9 micrograms. Thirteen of these children had blood lead levels over 10 micrograms per deciliter of blood, the official EPA threshold of concern. No level of lead exposure is considered safe, especially for children under six.

Since the first published report on lead contamination January 31, a spectacle of indifference, malfeasance and cover-up has come to light, with both District of Columbia and federal government officials implicated in a scandal which may have done irreparable harm to the city's population.

Lead is a powerful toxic substance with particularly devastating effects on young children and fetuses. It causes behavioral and learning problems and reduced IQ in children exposed to it—most of them through ingesting paint chips in old dwellings with lead-based paint.

According to the DC Health Department, nearly 2,000 city residents have been tested at screening sites, with 13 children under six and three adults found to

have elevated lead levels. None of the 86 pregnant or nursing women tested so far had excessive lead in their blood. But those tested constitute only a tiny fraction of the population that has been drinking the lead-contaminated water for the past two years.

Both WASA and EPA officials were aware of extremely high levels of lead in the city's water system more than 18 months ago, but they deliberately concealed the toxic danger while assuring the public that the city's water supply was safe.

The contamination of the water supply is apparently the byproduct of the actions of the Army Corps of Engineers, owner the Washington Aqueduct, the main conduit for the water supply of WASA's service area, which includes the District of Columbia and neighboring Arlington and Falls Church, Virginia.

As early as 1997, according to an account published in the *Washington Post*, an EPA consultant warned that the Washington Aqueduct had to adopt one of two possible methods to mitigate lead contamination. It was necessary either to sharply reduce the water's pH level, the measure of its acidity, or to reduce the pH by a lesser amount while introducing a chemical additive called orthophosphate. Otherwise the corrosive effect of water running through the city's plumbing, much of it consisting of aging lead piping, would leach lead into the drinking water supply.

For a combination of budgetary and technical reasons, these warnings were ignored, and the Corps of Engineers adopted a policy of reducing pH by a small amount but without adding orthophosphate, because that would require costly sewage treatment at the other end of the water cycle. The EPA approved this non-solution in a letter dated May 2002.

By then, WASA's water quality manager Seema S. Bhat had learned of significant lead contamination in

the water supply and was warning her superiors. Bhat was eventually fired in March 2003 for going over the heads of city officials and informing the EPA about the lead problem. Bhat has filed suit for improper termination and won a preliminary ruling from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration last year ordering her reinstatement.

Bhat emailed her boss, Kofi A. Boateng, on July 30, 2002, to inform him about the lead contamination—then reaching 75 parts per billion, five times the level considered safe by the EPA. Boateng did not open the email for two weeks, and then denounced Bhat for going to the EPA and recommended that she be fired.

There was further correspondence between WASA and the federal agency, between various branches of the District government, and inside the EPA itself for the next year and a half, without any action being taken either to remedy the problem or notify the public. WASA and EPA officials continued to oppose adding phosphates to the water supply because of the additional cost of sewage treatment

WASA was required under federal rules to notify consumers of the lead contamination level and carry out a public education campaign. The agency satisfied the form but not the substance of this obligation, in a particularly cynical manner. Last year it sent customers a glossy annual report headlined, “Your Drinking Water is Safe,” with disclaimers buried inside, in small print, noting that samples taken at numerous homes had found excessive levels of toxins such as lead.

In October 2003 the crisis came to a head when new WASA studies were submitted to the EPA showing that 4,000 of the 6,000 homes tested had unacceptable levels of lead contamination, as high as 300 parts per billion. Both agencies still kept quiet until the first reports appeared in the *Post* on January 31, 2004.

The last six weeks have seen a scramble to escape responsibility and accountability for the scandal. Officials of WASA, the EPA and the Corp of Engineers have pointed fingers at each other, while releasing contradictory and frequently misleading information about what precautions District residents should take.

WASA initially claimed that only the 23,000 District homes with lead-lined service lines—the lines connecting the home to the water main—were at risk. Many other homes in the city, however, have lead pipes, solder or leaded brass faucets which can also

contribute to lead leaching. For another 37,000 homes, WASA does not know the metallic composition of the service lines, frequently buried underground.

When testing was extended last month to newer homes with copper service lines, nearly 10 percent had dangerous lead levels in their water. High lead levels were also found in Arlington, across the river from Washington, DC, a relatively affluent area with more modern water infrastructure.

The city health department issued a health advisory in February urging young children, pregnant women and nursing mothers not to drink unfiltered tap water in the 23,000 homes with lead service lines. Two weeks ago, WASA began distributing free water filters to residents of those homes, and on March 16 Mayor Anthony Williams ordered the agency to mail a filter to every one of the 23,000 homes.

The filters last only two months and must be replaced, an expense which many of the city’s poorer residents will be reluctant to incur. Moreover, they are not effective in stopped lead contamination levels as high as 710 parts per billion—a staggering 47 times the legal level—found in some homes recently tested.

The lead contamination scandal has two important political dimensions. It reveals the complete indifference of federal officials to the health of the people of the District of Columbia, largely black and working class. And it exposes the fraud of the Bush administration’s “homeland security” campaign. While seeking to whip up hysteria over alleged threats to the nation’s capital from terrorists armed with chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons, the administration ignores the real threat to public health and safety posed by the crumbling infrastructure of American society.



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