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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's sign is seen on the podium at EPA headquarters i

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's sign is seen on the podium at EPA headquarters in Washington July 11, 2018. The EPA proposed the first federal limits on "forever chemicals" in drinking water March 14, a move the Biden administration said will save thousands of lives and prevent some serious illnesses attributed to exposure to these chemicals over time. (OSV News/Reuters/Ting Shen)

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The Environmental Protection Agency proposed in March the first federal limits on "forever chemicals" in drinking water, a move the Biden administration said will save thousands of lives and prevent some serious illnesses attributed to exposure to these chemicals over time.

The proposal would limit toxic PFAS chemicals, or per- and polyfluorinated substances, to the lowest detectable levels. These chemicals are found in consumer, commercial and industrial products, and build up in people, wildlife and the environment. Known as "forever chemicals," they do not break down in water and are linked to an array of health issues when humans are exposed over time,

including lower infant birth weights and kidney or testicular cancer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

President Joe Biden, a Catholic Democrat, has previously called for a reduction in PFAS pollution and the White House called the proposal part of his "action plan" on the issue. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also has called for federal efforts to reduce human and environmental exposure to PFAS chemicals.

"Communities across this country have suffered far too long from the ever-present threat of PFAS pollution," EPA administrator Michael Regan said in a March 14 statement.

"That's why President Biden launched a whole-of-government approach to aggressively confront these harmful chemicals, and EPA is leading the way forward," Regan said. "EPA's proposal to establish a national standard for PFAS in drinking water is informed by the best available science, and would help provide states with the guidance they need to make decisions that best protect their communities."

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A study by the Environmental Working Group found 200 million Americans could be exposed to PFAS in their drinking water at a concentration of one part per trillion or higher.

"This action has the potential to prevent tens of thousands of PFAS-related illnesses and marks a major step toward safeguarding all our communities from these dangerous contaminants," Regan said.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-New Hampshire, who was a lead negotiator in the U.S. Senate of water provisions in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, said in a statement that the new EPA regulations are a "bold step forward" for families and parents to "have the peace of mind they deserve when they turn on the tap."

"This has long been a top concern for me and is why as a lead negotiator of the water provisions in the bipartisan infrastructure bill, I fought to include a historic level of funding — $10 billion — to combat PFAS exposure," Shaheen said. "These dollars will be crucial in providing our municipalities with the resources they will need to comply with these new regulations so that together we can prioritize clean

water for our communities."

Shaheen urged the Biden administration to "move swiftly" in making sure funds from the infrastructure law are delivered in a timely fashion, so public water operators can start to "meet these new enforceable drinking water levels."

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-West Virginia, ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, said in a statement, "After years of urging three consecutive administrations of different parties to do so, I'm pleased a safe drinking water standard has finally been issued for PFOA and PFOS."

"No one should have to wonder if their water is safe to drink, and it's critical that we get this important regulation right," Capito said.

The U.S. Catholic bishops' conference has previously called on Congress to further reduce human and environmental exposure to PFAS chemicals. In a 2021 letter to lawmakers, the conference wrote that human and environmental concerns are "interconnected."

"Prolonged exposure to these chemicals can cause cancer, thyroid problems, birth defects, and reproductive, developmental, and immune system disruptions," the letter said. "Of particular concern is a growing body of research that indicates pregnant and nursing mothers, and their children, are especially affected."

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