***EPA announces plan to address PFAS contamination***

The Environmental Protection Agency on Monday released a strategy for reducing contamination from PFAS, a group of more than 9,000 compounds that have been dubbed “forever chemicals” for their ability to persist in water, soil and tissue without breaking down.

PFAS is shorthand for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, which have been used in a wide variety of manufacturing processes and which have been found in drinking water and groundwater throughout the United States. Exposure to PFAS in the environment may be linked to harmful health effects in humans and animals, EPA says.

The Defense Department recently released a report to Congress that said the military has informed more than 2,100 farm operations around the country that they are within a mile “down gradient” from high levels of PFAS contamination at military bases.

EPA plans to set limits and require monitoring of public water supplies for two of the chemicals, PFOA and PFOS. A final rule is expected to be issued in the fall of 2023.

Exposure to "unsafe levels of PFOA/PFOS concentrations through drinking water may result in health effects including developmental effects to fetuses during pregnancy, cancer, liver effects, immune effects and thyroid effects,” according to a National Science Foundation summary of an EPA drinking water health advisory from 2016.

In the only mention of agriculture in the roadmap, EPA said it would complete a risk assessment for PFOA and PFOS in biosolids by winter 2024. The risk assessment will then be used to decide whether to regulate PFOA and PFOS in biosolids, EPA said.

“Biosolids, or sewage sludge, from wastewater treatment facilities can sometimes contain PFAS,” EPA said. “When spread on agricultural fields, the PFAS can contaminate crops and livestock.”

“If EPA determines that a regulation is appropriate, biosolids standards would improve the protection of public health and wildlife health from health effects resulting from exposure to biosolids containing PFOA and PFOS,” EPA said.

Reaction to release of the roadmap was generally positive, but there also was criticism that the agency is not moving quickly enough.

The Environmental Working Group praised the plan, with EWG's Ken Cook calling it “good news that Administrator (Michael) Regan will fulfill President Biden’s pledge to take quick action to reduce PFOA and PFOS in tap water, to restrict industrial releases of PFAS into the air and water, and to designate PFOA and PFOS as hazardous substances to hold polluters accountable.”

EPA said it will propose designating PFOA and PFOS as hazardous substances under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, also known as Superfund, which would require reporting of the releases of those chemicals above certain quantities and require PFAS cleanup.

That action “would ensure manufacturers will fully report (their) releases of 175 listed PFAS (a subset of the PFAS that are in commerce), giving communities the information they need to know about where this pollution is happening,” said Earthjustice, an environmental law organization.

Announcing the plan Monday, Regan said EPA "will immediately broaden and accelerate the cleanup of PFAS contamination that we now know of today. When EPA becomes aware of a situation where PFAS poses a serious threat to the health of a community, we will not hesitate to take swift action, strong enforcement to address the threat and hold polluters accountable all across the country."

The agency also is launching a number of actions to test for PFAS — for example, by conducting research “to identify PFAS sources in the outdoor and indoor environment, to characterize PFAS movement through the environment, and to identify the relative importance of different human exposure pathways to PFAS (e.g., ingestion of contaminated food or water, interaction with household articles or consumer products, and inhalation of indoor or outdoor air containing PFAS).”

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, however, which represents public sector employees in environmental agencies, called the plan “a dud.” It lays out “future promises of planning to plan, and only promising future regulatory limits on two PFAS, PFOA and PFOS, in drinking water,” and relies on “voluntary stewardship programs that have consistently failed the American public.”

Also on Monday, PEER released an EPA dataset “with information on some 120,000 industrial facilities that ‘may be handling’” PFAS — a figure that is several times higher than outside experts have estimated. The plan identifies no mechanism to identify which of those facilities are handling PFAS and if they are doing so in a manner that is safe for the public.”

Earthjustice also was pleased with the plan. “We are pleased to see that EPA plans to remove an exemption that allows manufacturers from fully reporting their PFAS releases to the agency and the public,” said Earthjustice legislative counsel Christine Santillana. “Communities need accurate reporting of pollution.”

Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Tom Carper, D-Del., said he was "encouraged that EPA is giving this urgent public health threat the attention and seriousness it deserves. This is truly a soup-to-nuts plan — one that commits to cleaning up PFAS in our environment while also putting protections in place to prevent more of these forever chemicals from finding their way into our lives.”