

### D.C. Scare Prompts EPA to Review Rules on Lead

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by D'Vera Cohn - The Washington Post

The Environmental Protection Agency's top water quality official said yesterday that a review of federal drinking-water regulations triggered by the lead problem in the District is targeting several troublesome issues, including the definition of "lead-free" plumbing materials.

Benjamin H. Grumbles, acting administrator for water, also told a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee that the agency's national survey turned up isolated lead contamination in school drinking water and concerns about inadequate funding to do more testing.

Grumbles said he has heard no new information to change his previous statements that the nation's drinking-water law is working well overall. Rep. Paul E. Gillmor (R-Ohio), subcommittee chairman, agreed. "I am not convinced that this situation demands that we need to make drinking-water utilities face tougher standards," he said.

Some Democrats and environmental groups, as well as Sen. James M. Jeffords (I-Vt.), want drinking-water rules to be tightened.

The EPA review was triggered by the disclosure this year that tests found unsafe lead levels in the drinking water in thousands of D.C. homes. District residents and officials complained that the D.C. Water and Sewer Authority had not fully informed the public about the problem. The EPA has oversight responsibility for WASA.

Officials at the city's two water treatment plants have begun adding a chemical to protect against lead leaching from pipes, and WASA has committed to a lead-pipe replacement program.

"The basic message is the numbers indicate that the [drinking-water] rule has been successful, but there are some legitimate areas to look at . . . to see if they can be improved," Grumbles said in an interview after the hearing.

Under questioning by Rep. Janice D. **Schakowsky** (D-Ill.), who complained about loopholes in

the drinking-water law, Grumbles said a provision that allows plumbing fixtures to be labeled "lead-free" even if they have up to 8 percent lead "is definitely on the table to review and look at." Research has found that those fixtures can leach measurable lead into drinking water, especially in newer homes.

**Schakowsky** also questioned why the government requires water systems to replace 7 percent of their lead pipes each year if testing finds excessive lead levels in the drinking water but allows them to count some pipes as "replaced" if they pass a test for lead contamination.

"That is one of the areas that we really want to look at carefully," Grumbles replied.

Another area for review, he said, is what to do when tests find unusually high lead readings, as happened in some D.C. homes and school water fountains. Grumbles said the agency is considering a different approach to responding to those high levels but did not go into details.

The EPA surveyed states about what they were doing to address potential lead contamination in school drinking water because lead is particularly toxic to children. The EPA does not require states to test school drinking water regularly because it interpreted a 1996 court decision as prohibiting it from doing so.

Grumbles said several states have taken additional actions to check school drinking water, adding that some state officials "also indicated that it would be difficult to expand programs beyond existing efforts because state drinking-water programs are challenged by shortfalls in funding."

"We need to do more work on that front, and it needs to be a bipartisan partnership" involving utilities, schools, lawmakers and others, he said.

In other testimony, representatives of two water-utility trade groups called for an independent investigation by the National Academy of Sciences or a similar organization into the causes of the D.C. lead problem, saying it would be premature to rewrite drinking-water law before that.