

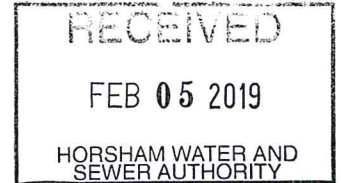
The Intelligencer

Opinion

Guest Opinion: Before Senate confirms Wheeler, he must commit to tackling PFAS contamination

By Brian Fitzpatrick, Madeleine Dean and Brendan F. Boyle

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In the coming weeks, our colleagues in the Senate will vote on whether to confirm Andrew Wheeler to be the Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. They should not give him the job unless he makes specific commitments to provide regulatory oversight for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS chemicals.

Pennsylvania is at the epicenter of the emerging environmental and public health crisis from PFAS chemicals like PFOA and PFOS. These toxic chemicals are best known for their previous use in products like Teflon and Scotchgard but have a wide variety of other applications. They're used in firefighting foams discharged at airports and military bases, on grease-resistant food wrappers, on water and stain-resistant textiles, and even in some cosmetics. They pollute drinking water and are associated with various health effects including: kidney cancer, testicular cancer, thyroid disease, suppressed immunity, high cholesterol, and low birth weights.

We represent communities on the front lines of this issue. The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection has identified at least 20 different sites contaminated with PFAS chemicals in Pennsylvania alone, including several sites in our districts. We have worked with the Department of Defense to remediate this contamination in our communities; however, the true extent of contamination nationwide is unknown because there are no requirements for ongoing testing or monitoring.

Many of our constituents drank water with high levels of PFOA and PFOS for years, and possibly even decades, before realizing it was contaminated. We hear from concerned citizens every week who are now worried about how their

exposure will affect their health and the health of their children. These chemicals are “forever chemicals,” meaning they will never break down in the environment. Without proactive cleanup efforts, people living in polluted communities will continue to be exposed. What’s more, once these chemicals are in your body they can stay there for decades.

Pennsylvania is not alone. Last week, we were among the founding members of a bipartisan PFAS Task Force with other members representing districts in Michigan, New York, Massachusetts, and Ohio that are also grappling with PFAS contamination. Experts estimate that as many as 110 million Americans may be exposed to PFAS chemicals in their drinking water.

PFAS contamination is a national problem that requires national action. States and affected communities are looking to EPA for leadership and guidance. We were deeply troubled by reports last week that EPA’s forthcoming national PFAS management plan did not include a commitment to set enforceable limits on PFOA and PFOS in drinking water. A health-protective drinking water limit is one of the most impactful actions the EPA could take to reduce PFAS exposure in communities like ours.

Anyone up for the job of EPA Administrator should make a firm commitment to setting a drinking water limit for PFOA and PFOS, in addition to taking other necessary steps like monitoring for other PFAS chemicals in drinking water and devoting resources to EPA’s research arm for new studies. Given the scale and scope of our country’s PFAS problem, anyone who is not willing to make those commitments should not get the job.

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