

EPA: No changes to federal lead water rule until next year

April 13 2016, by By Matthew Daly



Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Water Deputy Assistant Administrator Joel Beauvais testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 13, 2016, before a House joint subcommittee hearing with the Environment and the Economy subcommittee and Health subcommittee on the ongoing Flint lead-contamination water crisis. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

The Environmental Protection Agency's top water regulator said Wednesday that officials are working urgently to strengthen a federal

rule limiting lead and copper in drinking water—a key focus in the ongoing lead-contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan.

But Joel Beauvais, acting chief of the EPA's water office, said proposed changes will not be released until next year, with a final rule expected months after that.

Beauvais told Congress that he and others at the EPA "certainly have a sense of urgency" about making changes to the lead and copper rule, but added, "We also want to get them right."

Meanwhile, Michigan's two senators said late Wednesday they have agreed to remove a bipartisan proposal to provide federal funds to help Flint from a larger energy bill stalled in the Senate.

Democratic Sens. Debbie Stabenow and Gary Peters said they were disappointed that despite weeks of negotiations, Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, has refused to allow a vote on the Flint legislation. Stabenow and Peters said their bill would help not just Flint, but communities across the country with aging water infrastructures.

The Michigan senators said they would seek to find a way to move the Flint aid package through the Senate. Their decision to strip it from the energy bill allows the long-stalled energy measure to move forward.



Michigan Department of Environmental Quality Director Keith Creagh testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 13, 2016, before a House joint subcommittee hearing with the Environment and the Economy subcommittee and Health subcommittee hearing on the ongoing Flint lead-contamination water crisis. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

The bill promotes a wide range of energy, from renewables such as solar and wind power to natural gas and hydropower. The legislation also would speed federal approval of projects to export liquefied natural gas to Europe and Asia and boost energy efficiency.

Flint's drinking water became tainted when the city switched from the Detroit water system and began drawing from the Flint River in April 2014 to save money. The impoverished city was under state control at the time. The crisis has affected some 100,000 residents of the predominantly African-American city.

Regulators failed to ensure the water was treated properly and lead from aging pipes leached into the water supply.



Rep. Joe Pitts, R-Pa. speaks during a House joint subcommittee hearing with the Environment and the Economy subcommittee and Health subcommittee joint hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 13, 2016, on the ongoing Flint lead-contamination water crisis. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Elevated lead levels have been found in at least 325 people, including 221 children. Lead contamination has been linked to learning disabilities and other problems.

The lead and copper rule, part of the federal Safe Water Drinking Act, requires water systems across the country to monitor drinking water to ensure that lead, copper and other substances do not exceed federal

recommendations.

The rule is widely considered flawed. Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder called it "dumb and dangerous" at a hearing last month. Unless the federal rule is changed, "this tragedy will befall other American cities," Snyder said.



Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response Nicole Lurie testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 13, 2016, before a House joint subcommittee hearing with the Environment and the Economy subcommittee and Health subcommittee hearing on the ongoing Flint lead-contamination water crisis. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

EPA chief Gina McCarthy, speaking at the same March 17 hearing, said the federal rules "definitely need clarification, they need to be strengthened, and we're taking a look at that."

Beauvais repeated that message at a hearing Wednesday, telling the House Energy and Commerce Committee that the EPA has been "actively working on revisions" to the lead and copper rule for more than two years—well before the Flint crisis was declared a public health emergency in October 2015. An advisory council that has been studying the issue recommended extensive changes in December, Beauvais said.

"We're working hard on it. We hope to get it right," he said.

Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich., the energy panel's chairman, urged the agency to speed up its work, saying 2017 is "a long ways off."



Michigan Department of Environmental Quality Director Keith Creagh, right, accompanied by, from left, EPA Office of Water Deputy Assistant Administrator Joel Beauvais; Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response Nicole Lurie; Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Director Nick Lyon; testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 13, 2016, before a House joint subcommittee hearing with the

Environment and the Economy subcommittee and Health subcommittee hearing on the ongoing Flint lead-contamination water crisis. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

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