

US urges Illinois city to give customers bottled water

April 26 2016, by By Ryan J. Foley

Federal regulators are recommending that an Illinois city provide bottled water or filters to residents affected by high levels of lead in their drinking water.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is also urging Galesburg, Illinois, to pay for additional lead testing for customers who request it and provide more public education about health risks. In addition, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has ordered the city to perform a corrosion control study to learn whether specific treatments might better prevent old pipes and plumbing from leaching lead into tap water.

The actions come in response to an investigation published this month by The Associated Press, which found that Galesburg had one of the nation's most persistent problems of lead in [drinking water](#). An AP analysis of EPA data involving 75,000 water systems found that nearly 1,500 systems serving 3.3 million Americans have exceeded the lead cap of 15 parts per billion at least once in the past three years.

Galesburg's water has exceeded that level 22 times over the last 25 years, including in the most recent sampling period last fall. Knox County, which is home to Galesburg, has also long struggled with some of the highest rates of [childhood lead poisoning](#) in Illinois.

In an April 20 letter to Illinois officials, EPA regional water division director Tinka Hyde said the agency was concerned about the elevated

blood lead levels and the city's history of lead in water. She urged the state to get a commitment from Galesburg, a city of 30,000 located 150 miles southwest of Chicago, to provide bottled water or filters to residents whose homes exceed the federal action-level for lead.

"Otherwise we will consider other options to protect public health," Hyde wrote.

The EPA has taken several actions to improve the monitoring of lead in drinking water after the crisis in Flint, Michigan, where some children were poisoned when the city shifted to a more corrosive water source.

Galesburg city manager Todd Thompson told the city council in a meeting Monday night that the steps recommended by the EPA would cost about \$90,000 to implement. That includes \$33,000 for the extra lead testing, \$25,000 for certified water filters, \$10,500 for [bottled water](#) and \$10,000 for the corrosion control study.

He said that it might take a decade or longer to replace the lead service lines at 4,700 homes in the city, which would cost \$10 million or more.

City aldermen said the lead poisoning rates were unacceptable, but several insisted that there's no proof their drinking water plays any role in them. Instead, they argued it made more sense to spend money removing lead paint from the city's old homes, which health officials believe to be the biggest factor in childhood lead poisoning.

Alderman Jeremy Karlin said the city's response was "in many ways being dictated" by regulators.

But U.S. Rep. Cheri Bustos, a Democrat who has been calling on the city to act, said she's pleased Galesburg leaders are considering the EPA's recommendations.

Also Tuesday, an Illinois EPA employee was in the city taking [water](#) samples at six homes where lead exceeded the federal standard last fall. Spokeswoman Kim Biggs said that move would assure that the samples, typically collected by homeowners, would be professionally drawn.

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