

Tests show lead in Benton Harbor tap water finally dropping

December 15 2021, by Michael Phillis



In this Friday, Oct. 22, 2021 file photo, a lone resident of Benton Harbor, Mich., walks across Britain Street Friday, Oct. 22, 2021, near the city's water tower in Benton Harbor. The water system in Benton Harbor has tested for elevated levels of lead for three consecutive years. Credit: AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast, File

The amount of lead in Benton Harbor, Michigan's drinking water has

declined, new testing shows, after three straight years of elevated results compelled residents to consume bottled water and prompted a hurried effort to replace old pipes.

Lead levels in the majority Black city's drinking water are now just within standards set by the state that if exceeded, force a utility to take corrective action and inform residents of a problem, according to state officials. Residents have worried about the effect on their families' health, as lead can slow cognitive development and is especially dangerous for children.

Michigan officials said the new results indicate that corrosion control to prevent pipes from leaching lead into drinking water is helping. But the nearly 10,000 residents of Benton Harbor should still use bottled water for basic activities such as drinking and cooking, officials said.

"Everything is going to continue as it has previously, it's just that the data is showing us that the corrosion control is working. We need to keep at it, keep improving it and keep working at it," said Eric Oswald, director of the division that oversee drinking water at the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy.

The state provides free bottled water for Benton Harbor's residents, but picking it up can be time consuming and tasks like cooking can quickly use up personal supplies. Homebound residents can ask for deliveries.

Since early 2019, residents have been offered free at-home filters designed to remove lead from the tap. In October, the state said it was reviewing the effectiveness of those filters "out of an abundance of caution" and issued guidance for residents to broadly use bottled water. Oswald said preliminary results indicate the filters are working properly, but it will take until the first few months of next year for the Environmental Protection Agency to finish the study and confirm

results.



In this Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021 file photo, Sylvester Bownes walks the nearly one-mile round-trip to the Benton Harbor High School from his home with bottled and jugs full of water Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021, in Benton Harbor, Mich. The water system in Benton Harbor, has tested for elevated levels of lead for three consecutive years. Credit: AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast, File

Once the study is complete, state officials will decide whether filters are sufficiently reliable or bottled water should continue to be broadly used, Oswald said.

Benton Harbor's recent water system tests reveal 15 parts per billion of

lead; any more and it would exceed Michigan standards. Testing from earlier in the year produced levels of 24 ppb.

The highest site sampled had 48 ppb of lead. Testing from earlier in the year produced a few results in the 100s of ppb.

In the wake of the Flint water crisis, Michigan passed the nation's tightest requirements for reducing lead in drinking water, implementing new testing standards and timelines for lead pipe replacement. Despite those changes, [advocacy groups](#) in September told the EPA in a petition that city and state officials had not acted quickly enough to address Benton Harbor's problems.

Nicholas Leonard, executive director of the Great Lakes Environmental Law Center whose name is on the petition, said Benton Harbor has suffered from discrimination and a history of disinvestment in its infrastructure.

"That no doubt played a central role in creating this problem," Leonard said previously.



In this Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021 file photo, Ambie Bell, a candidate for Benton Harbor City Commissioner, delivers water to a resident in Benton Harbor, Mich. The water system in Benton Harbor has tested for elevated levels of lead for three consecutive years. Credit: AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast, File

The state's response accelerated this fall. In addition to providing [bottled water](#), Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has promised to replace all of the city's lead service lines, which connect buildings to the water main, within 18 months—far faster than is normal. That effort is just getting underway.

The Democratic governor in November ordered a review of the state's [drinking](#) water rules with the aim of reducing [lead levels](#) further. Also, the EPA ordered the [water](#) system to make improvements.

Across the U.S., millions of lead service lines are underground. The recently passed infrastructure bill secured \$15 billion for lead service line replacement and the reconciliation package pending in Congress includes billions more—money that advocates have said is vital but will not be enough to remove every lead pipe.

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