

EPA confirms filters reduce lead in Michigan city's water

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The filters distributed in Benton Harbor, Michigan during the city's recent lead water crisis worked properly, according to a study state officials said was conducted to give residents assurance.

Michigan officials said the study was done "out of an abundance of caution" after residents and advocates in Benton Harbor slammed the state's slow response to the city's lead problem and requested more aggressive actions—including a study of the filters.

"We found that properly operated filters were successful in reducing lead considerably and consistently," said Tera Fong, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's water division director for the region that includes Michigan.

But Fong noted the agency also found the filters were not being used properly in many cases, and that public outreach could help address the problem.

The filters were distributed in early 2019 after tests revealed high lead levels in the tap water of Benton Harbor. After elevated lead levels persisted, residents and activists raised concerns that the majority Black city was being ignored even in the wake of the crisis in Flint. Soon after, officials promised stronger corrective measures, including a filter study.

In the meantime, state officials recommended residents rely mostly on free bottled water, leading to residents waiting in long lines at distribution sites. State officials said water distribution is now offered daily and that cases can be delivered to residents who have difficulty picking them up.

The study released Thursday by the EPA found all samples from nearly 200 homes with properly used pitcher and faucet filters had low lead levels that were within federal guidelines. No lead was detected in the vast majority of samples.

The filters that were distributed in Benton Harbor are certified to reduce lead, unlike many standard at-home water filters, and are supposed to be

used with cold water. Filter cartridges need to be replaced once they expire.

Michigan officials said recent tests show lead levels in the [city's tap water](#) are within federal thresholds and that there are no other contamination issues. But they said the state will continue providing free bottled water until work replacing the city's lead service lines is completed by the spring of 2023.

Lead exposure is a concern because of the health problems it can cause, particularly in young children who could experience issues including slowed cognitive development.

Filters have also been a part of the response to lead water crises in other cities and are important because they let residents continue using water in their homes, rather than having to lug cases of bottled water home.

But Ben Pauli, board president of one of the organizations that signed the petition in Benton Harbor and an activist during Flint's crisis, said filters shouldn't be used as an excuse to stop distributing bottled water, which some people prefer.

Elin Warn Betanzo of the consulting firm Safe Water Engineering said there wasn't evidence of poor filter performance in Benton Harbor last year, but a "lack of data." When deficiencies were identified at the city's water plant beyond lead, she raised questions about the filters' effectiveness and advocated for the response to rely on bottled water.

Concerns about filters became an issue in Newark, New Jersey, too. Though the vast majority of filters worked properly during that city's crisis, trust in them was undermined after officials initially said they weren't reliable based on a small number of results, said Jeannie M. Purchase, who researched water filters at Virginia Tech and now works

at a Washington D.C water utility.

Purchase said cities should conduct studies before distributing filters and explain that no device is perfect, but that they are generally highly effective.

Darren Lytle, a lead scientist in the EPA's Office of Research and Development, also noted that the water chemistry in Newark is different from Benton Harbor, making filter problems in Benton Harbor less likely. State officials said in October a study would be done to validate that.

Still, the decision to temporarily halt distribution of filters in Benton Harbor could undermine trust in them, said Sri Vedachalam, who heads the water program at the Environmental Policy Innovation Center.

Marc A. Edwards, a water treatment researcher at Virginia Tech, said whether officials provide bottled water during a lead crisis is a policy decision. He said filters are highly reliable at removing lead and that relying on bottled water can be expensive and inconvenient.

"Once communities get on to bottled water, it is a habit, and it is hard to get off," he said.

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