

# US drops planned limit for toxin that damages infant brains (Update)

18 June 2020, by Ellen Knickmeyer



In this March 28, 2005 file photo a sign posted outside a water well indicates perchlorate contamination at the site in Rialto, Calif. The Environmental Protection Agency has ended an Obama-era drive to regulate a widespread contaminant in drinking water linked to brain damage in infants. EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler's decision Thursday rejects warnings from pediatric groups and others that the move will mean significantly lower IQs for an unknown number of American babies. The contaminant is perchlorate, a component in rocket fuel and ammunition. The Obama administration announced in 2011 it intended to introduce federal regulation of it. Wheeler says now no federal regulation is necessary. He says that's partly because some states and public water systems already have taken steps to deal with the contaminant. (AP Photo/Ric Francis, File)

The Trump administration on Thursday rejected imposing [federal drinking-water limits](#) for a chemical used in fireworks and other explosives and linked to brain damage in newborns, opting to override Obama administration findings that the neurotoxin was contaminating the drinking water of millions of Americans.

The contaminant is perchlorate, a component in rocket fuel, ammunition and other explosives, including fireworks. The Associated Press found

one high-profile example of that on Thursday, reviewing a [2016 U.S. Geological Survey report](#) that ties high levels of perchlorate contamination in the water at [Mount Rushmore national memorial](#) in South Dakota with past years of fireworks displays there.

While officials stopped the fireworks shows at the Black Hills memorial a decade ago, the pyrotechnics are scheduled to resume this Independence Day holiday at the urging of President Donald Trump, who plans to attend the festivities on July 3.

His administration has rolled back or eliminated scores of existing or pending public health and environmental protections, and the latest example came Thursday when Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler said the government would not move forward on setting the first mandatory federal limits for perchlorate in drinking water.

The rollbacks have targeted Obama-era initiatives in particular, with the Trump administration saying the regulations are burdensome to business and are unnecessary.

Wheeler said in a statement the decision to drop the introduction of federal limits for perchlorate fulfill's Trump's "promise to pare back burdensome 'one-size-fits-all' overregulation for the American people."

Perchlorate from runoff contaminates the drinking water of as many as 16 million Americans, the Obama administration said in 2011 when it announced the EPA would act to set maximum limits for perchlorate for the first time.



This March 22, 2019, file photo shows Mount Rushmore in Keystone, S.D. The Trump administration on Thursday, June 18, 2020, rejected imposing federal drinking-water limits for a chemical used in fireworks and other explosives and linked to brain damage in newborns. The contaminant is perchlorate, a component in rocket fuel, ammunition and other explosives, including fireworks. The Associated Press found one high-profile example of that on Thursday, reviewing a 2016 U.S. Geological Survey report that links high levels of perchlorate contamination in the water at Mount Rushmore national memorial with past years of fireworks displays there. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski, File)

Perchlorate can damage the development of fetuses and children and cause measurable drops in IQ in newborns, the American Academy of Pediatrics said last August in urging the "strongest possible" federal limits.

Erik Olson of the Natural Resources Defense Council advocacy group said the EPA's decision Thursday was "illegal, unscientific and unconscionable."

An earlier court-ordered consent decree, set after Olson's group accused the EPA of slow-walking the then-planned regulation, gave the agency until this month to set a maximum limit for perchlorate. The organization said Thursday it planned a legal challenge to the EPA's decision to drop the proposed regulation.

The EPA said last year it was looking at four

options, including a limit for perchlorate in drinking water far higher than those that California, Massachusetts and other states are currently adopting. Another option was dropping the proposal to regulate perchlorate entirely, based on the contention that "perchlorate does not occur in public water systems with a frequency, and at a level of public health concern."

Wheeler said federal regulation was not warranted now partly because of the steps that some states and public drinking water systems have taken to reduce perchlorate contamination.

The EPA required some nationwide testing for perchlorate in drinking water only from 2001 to 2005, making it impossible to determine how severe a problem remains nationally, Olson said.

But Trump's EPA says it looked at some of the limited local testing done for perchlorate, including 15 water systems in a total of 12 states. It said the monitoring found levels of the rocket fuel chemical had declined in some of them.



Andrew Wheeler, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, listens during a Senate Environment and Public Works Committee oversight hearing to examine the Environmental Protection Agency, Wednesday, May 20, 2020 on Capitol Hill in Washington. (Al Drago/Pool via AP)

Delaware Sen. Tom Carper, the top Democrat on

the Environment and Public Works Committee, said in a statement that the EPA "abdicated its responsibility to set federal drinking water standards for a chemical long known to be unsafe, instead leaving it up to states to decide whether or not to protect people from it."

With the Mount Rushmore fireworks a few weeks away, a National Parks Service assessment has concluded there would be no environmental harm from reviving the annual fireworks display, parks service spokeswoman Alexandra Picavet said.

But the agency's written environmental assessment said workers planned to monitor any increase in perchlorate at Mount Rushmore after the fireworks. If readings change, more analysis "may be necessary to evaluate future events" at Mount Rushmore, the report concluded.

The memorial serves 3 million visitors a year and year-round park personnel. Picavet said the water is not the primary water source for visitors and workers, and that treatment removes the perchlorate from Mount Rushmore's drinking water.

The 2016 U.S. Geological Survey report called perchlorate contamination at Mount Rushmore "a major concern of park management." It said past years' fireworks displays were the "most probable source" of the contamination.

Authorities have cited a range of public health and environmental concerns, especially the risk of wildfires, in stopping fireworks at Mount Rushmore and not resuming them until now.

Sampling by the U.S. Geological Survey found perchlorate contamination in a water well at Mount Rushmore at more than two times an advisory-only level set by President George W. Bush's administration in 2008. Levels in a stream were more than three times higher that advisory level.

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