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P.O. Box 123 • Port Orchard, WA 98366 • 888-881-0958 • 360-876-0958

We have PFAS in our water. . . What do we do now? Dec 2023

PFAS includes a wide range of chemicals (PFOA, PFOS, PFNA, PFHxS, PFBS, etc) associated with multiple serious health concerns. The WSDOH has a lot of information about PFAS on their website at: <https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/contaminants/pfas>

The proposed maximum contaminant level (MCL) for PFOA and PFOS is 4.0 ng/L each as well as a “Hazard Index” of 1.0, determined by a formula for other PFAS chemicals. The current Washington State Action levels for PFOA and PFAS are 10 ng/L and 15ng/L, respectively. Right now, the only requirements are to continue testing and provide public notification if your levels are above the state action level; however, water systems with PFAS levels above the proposed MCL will be required to reduce or eliminate PFAS.

Can you treat water to remove PFAS?

Yes! There are two primary treatment techniques for PFAS: Granular Activated Carbon (like a giant Brita filter) and a specialized adsorption resin. Reverse osmosis also removes PFAS, but is more expensive and generates a waste stream that is expensive to dispose. Which treatment technique is best depends on the water quality, existing infrastructure, and how the water is used. Treatment for small systems should cost approximately \$2,000-\$3,500 per gpm to be treated.

Are there other alternatives to treatment?

Yes! Often times it makes more sense to drill a new well in a different location, or to a deeper aquifer. Another alternative could be to purchase water from or consolidate with another water system. The best alternative depends on what the option will cost (construction as well as on-going O&M), the values of the water system, and the long-term needs associated with the alternative. The cost of non-treatment alternatives depends of course on how deep an alternative well would be or what the requirements for connecting to another water system are.

How can we pay for this new requirement?

While there is no requirement to mitigate for PFAS right now, the requirement to mitigate and the associated deadlines are anticipated to be out within the next year. Deciding how to mitigate for PFAS and making a funding plan early will provide you with the best chance of receiving grants, or other funding assistance.

Grants: The WSDOH State Revolving fund has grants available for “emerging contaminants”, of which PFAS receives the highest priority. While this grant is no guarantee, it is anticipated to be available for multiple (but limited) years. Systems that “get in line” now will be eligible for future funding cycles, if they are not selected in the first year of application. To be eligible for this grant, the system has to have a planning document approved (a Small Water System Management Program or a Water System Plan) prior to the application. Applications are accepted the beginning of October through the end of November each year. In order to ensure DOH will have time to review and approve your plan by then, it should be submitted before August, so early in the year is the time to get started. If the application requirements aren’t met by the end of November, the system would need to wait until the following year to apply for funding.

There are also consolidation feasibility study grants available. These are only available to Community water systems and are accepted during the month of August each year. Additional information about DOH funding can be found here: <https://doh.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/DWSRF-2023FundingFlyer.pdf>

Class Action Lawsuit: There is a class action lawsuit against 3M and another against Dupont and several smaller companies. These suits have resulted in an agreed upon settlement that has been preliminarily approved by the court and should be finalized in early 2024. The settlement claims are now open; however, once the Effective date is set, water systems have only 60 days left to submit their claim. Most Community Group A water systems qualify to participate in the settlement, if they so choose. More information regarding the settlement is available at <https://www.pfaswatersettlement.com>

Loans: There are multiple low-interest loan programs available such as WSDOH State Revolving Fund, USDA Rural Development, RCAC, Commerce, and Public Works Board. Each of these programs have different eligibility requirements and funding terms.

What to do next?

If PFAS is in your water the first step is to determine the best way to mitigate the contamination and reduce or eliminate PFAS from the water you deliver. Once the optimum approach is chosen with cost estimates, then the best way to fund the project can be selected, and the desired timeline estimated. The sooner you take these earlier steps, the more likely you will qualify for grants, or to participate in the 3M/Dupont Settlements.

Is there help available?

As you have questions and are developing a plan, the following resources offer free advice and/or services:

1. Washington State Department of Health (especially your regional engineer)
2. Evergreen Rural Water of Washington
3. Rural Community Assistance Corporation

These organizations are able to provide advice, explain some of the funding programs, and may be able to get you started and point you to guidance documents if you want to develop a Small Water System Management Program and/or start an analysis of various alternatives on your own.

To get the mitigation (new well, treatment, or an inter-tie, etc) approved by DOH, you will eventually need to hire the services of a professional engineer. Most engineering firms that work in drinking water can also help with planning documents, analyses of alternatives, grant/loan applications, and other related services.

Northwest Water Systems specializes in assisting small water systems. We understand that small water systems do not have the budgets and resources of large cities and seek solutions that utilize as much of your existing infrastructure as possible and size components appropriate to the size of your water system. If we are the best fit for you, NWS is happy to provide as little or as much help as you need along the way. We can “do everything” to complete the analysis to determine the best option, SWSMP, grant application, and final design and paperwork so that the entire process is “hands off”, or we can work along side you and provide assistance with only those items you don’t want to do yourself.

NWS manages over 700 small water systems. Because at least 44 of them have had PFAS detections, we have endeavored to develop the best small water system PFAS expertise in Washington State. If you would like to visit with us more, please contact Lydia (lydia@nwwatersystems.com, 360-876-0958x108) in western Washington or Todd (todd@nwwatersystems.com, 509-934-5250) in eastern Washington.