

THE CLEAN WATER RULE

HOW FEDERAL WATER REGULATIONS
WILL IMPACT PUBLIC HEALTH

WHAT IS THE CLEAN WATER RULE (CWR)?

The Clean Water Rule (CWR) protects the nation's rain-dependent streams and wetlands from toxic pollution under the Clean Water Act. The CWR, created in 2015, seeks to extend clear protections to headwaters, intermittent streams, and wetlands. Before the CWR was passed, uncertainty about which bodies of water were protected by law created loopholes that put clean water supplies at risk.

Recent water quality assessments show the U.S. still has a long way to go in providing safe and healthy waters to all communities. Consider these statistics: over 50% of assessed rivers and streams fail to meet one or more state water quality standards, and fewer than 48% of wetlands are in good biological condition.

Healthy wetlands and streams provide many public health benefits to communities, including improving drinking water. When our water is not protected from contamination from heavy metals, pesticides, agricultural and industrial runoff, and waste, affected communities can be at risk for health issues. Exposure to contaminated water can lead to cancer, birth defects, neurological effects, learning disabilities, and asthma. As the climate changes and we begin to see more extreme weather events, wetlands can also serve as an invaluable protection against floods and extreme storms.

Unfortunately, the EPA has proposed to withdraw the 2015 Clean Water Rule (CWR) and replace it with a less health-protective regulation. The headwaters of drinking water supplies for one in three U.S. residents will be at-risk if the CWR is repealed.

Low-income communities and communities of color will be disproportionately impacted by revocation of the CWR as these populations are more likely to live in places with unsafe drinking water. Further, they are often hardest hit by climate challenges, especially water-related, as they frequently live in low-lying areas or near bodies of water; and lack the resources to prepare for and recover from storms.

Small and rural communities, who rely on private wells or whose water systems lack the resources to deal with polluted sources, will also be hit hard by delaying or weakening the CWR.

PSR, along with other public health and environmental groups, are urging the EPA to withdraw its current proposal to repeal the CWR and instead implement the 2015 final CWR as currently written as soon as possible. Weakening the CWR places our environment and health at risk.



HEALTH IMPACTS OF CONTAMINATED WATER:

Pathogens

• Water-borne diseases (i.e., diarrhea, gastrointestinal illness) can be caused by bacteria, viruses and parasites. Although water-associated diseases in developing countries are prevalent, they are also a serious challenge in developed countries impacting millions. More intense storms, flooding, and runoff due to climate change can potentially impact pathogen levels in water resources.



• Arsenic, which occurs naturally in some rocks that dissolve into water supplies, is known to cause cancer of the bladder, lung, and skin and is suspected to cause cancers of the liver and kidney.

Agricultural runoff

• Nitrates found in fertilizers and human and animal waste can wash into drinking water sources. They can be extremely toxic to infants and have been linked to birth defects

• Pesticide contamination of groundwater has been linked to cancer, developmental and reproductive problems.

• Nutrient runoff creates harmful algal blooms that contaminate drinking water sources in many areas, including the Great Lakes region, the Gulf Coast, and the Northeast. Some blooms produce toxic microcystin which sickens and kills not only people, but also fish, birds, and other livestock.

Heavy metals

• Mercury can contaminate water, as a result of coal combustion. It enters the food supply as methylmercury which is highly toxic. People can be harmed by methylmercury when they eat contaminated fish and shellfish. Exposure has been linked to preterm delivery, autism and other developmental disorders in children as well as heart problems in adults.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

As a health professional, here are some steps you can take to inform leaders at the EPA on how the CWR affects the health of your patients and your communities.



Submit Op-Eds and LTEs to local news sources



Schedule meetings with policymakers to discuss clean water concerns and encourage them to protect clean water programs



Provide written comments or testimony in support of the Clean Water Rule