COLORADO
Office of Communications
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State announces results of community water sampling project

DENVER, June 23, 2020: The state announced the results of a project that tested water statewide for PFAS, pervasive chemicals that originate from toxic firefighting foam and other sources. The state found that none of the treated drinking water tested was above the EPA's health advisory level, but the state did find higher levels of the chemicals in some groundwater sources.

The results are posted online in a data dashboard. With $500,000 awarded from the state legislature, the department facilitated the sampling of 400 water systems and 15 firefighting districts-- as well as 152 groundwater sources and 71 surface water sources like rivers and streams. The sampling included about half of the drinking water systems in the state serving around three-quarters of the population.

"The current results show that no drinking water tested above the EPA health advisory for two chemicals," said Kristy Richardson, state toxicologist at the Department of Public Health and Environment. "At the same time, we know science is evolving, and we are committed to using the most current and best available information to provide health-based guidance on exposure to the chemicals. As new studies become available, our understanding of health effects in humans -- and our recommendations -- will continue to be refined."

Key findings:

- Four entities that tested source water had sample results that exceeded the EPA health advisory. Three of the four entities already tested for the chemicals in previous years and have notified the public of those results-- Stratmoor Hills Water and Sanitation District and Security Water and Sanitation District located in El Paso County and Sugarloaf fire district located in Boulder County. The entities are either not using that source water or treating the water to remove the chemicals before using it as drinking water. The additional entity is Fourmile Fire District.

- Fourmile Fire District, located in Teller County, had not previously tested for the chemicals and found high levels in a well at one of their stations, but the state was informed the firefighters do not drink this well water. The fire district, local public health agency, and state are examining the geographical area to see if any residents living nearby may be impacted. Residents that live near the Four Mile station will be notified of the results and what steps they can take if they are concerned.

The state also sampled rivers and streams. All of the samples collected had some detectable level of the chemicals. The sample collected at the mouth of Sand Creek in Commerce City was above the EPA drinking water health advisory, but the state isn't aware of anyone directly drinking this affected water. Nonetheless, high levels of the chemicals in streams can impact downstream drinking water supplies since they don't break down.

The data indicate that industrial entities that have permits to discharge wastewater into rivers and streams may play a large role in the buildup of the chemicals. Sand Creek was sampled twice-- one upstream of Commerce City on the east end of Aurora and one downstream before it flows into the South Platte. A number of industries treat and discharge wastewater in that area. The upstream sample result was 13 ppt, and the chemical amount increased downstream to a combined level of 77 ppt for the chemicals, a level above EPA's drinking water health advisory.

The state recently released a survey that state dischargers are required to fill out providing information about the use and storage of certain products containing the chemicals. This will help the state better understand the risk of the chemicals entering state waters.

The state is also using its hazardous waste authority to require various sites along the Front Range to evaluate potential impacts to groundwater. State inspectors have evaluated three oil and gas facilities in the area of Sand Creek, and found that one facility has significantly impacted groundwater next to Sand Creek. The state will use the groundwater data and the surface water data from Sand Creek to determine if additional measures are needed to protect the creek.

"This is an essential step in filling in the gaps in our understanding of where the chemicals are in the state," said John Putnam, director of environmental programs at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. "But, our work is not complete -- we will continue to work to assess conditions for the other systems not sampled, private wells near areas of contamination, and Colorado's waters. And, we'll work to find solutions where the chemicals are found at high levels and to safely dispose of materials before they get to our waters."

As part of its action plan to address the chemicals, the state will propose a water quality policy to the Water Quality Control Commission in mid-July to enhance its ability to get more data on discharges of the chemicals to state waters and provide guidance on the need for filtration or other treatment. The policy will also help the state set limits on the chemicals from entering our waters.

Additionally, in spite of the shortened session, the legislature passed two important laws regarding the chemicals. There are now restrictions on the use of firefighting foam that contains the chemicals and a fee structure so the state can have the necessary resources to provide guidance on the health impacts and investigate and support communities that may be impacted. The fees will provide critical resources to (1) support additional sampling and health assessment for systems; (2) implement a takeback program to take bakc and dispose of materials with the chemicals; and (3) assist systems that have found the material in their source water.

More information about the chemicals can be found at www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/pfcs. You may also call the state at 303-692-2606 or email at cdphe_toxcall@state.co.us should you have questions about the toxicity of the chemicals.

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