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The Authoritative Resource on Safe WaterSM

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EPA, HHS Act on Fluoride

Today EPA and the Department of Health and Human Services (which includes the Centers for Disease Control) released a joint statement reaffirming the health benefits of water fluoridation, while also taking steps to ensure that no American gets unsafe levels of fluoride. HHS announced that it will take comment on lowering the recommended level for the addition of fluoride from the current range of 0.7-1.2 ppm, to a single value of 0.7 ppm. At the same time, EPA announced that it intends to consider tightening the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) for fluoride.

HHS – Addition of fluoride. HHS reiterated its view that water fluoridation at 0.7 ppm offers substantial benefits to public health. It moved away from a range for fluoridation to a single number in recognition of at least two factors: that we now get fluoride from other sources (such as toothpaste), and that regional differences in water consumption have evened out in recent decades. The first means that many of us already get some fluoride even before its added to the water, and the second means people in some parts of the country no longer drink appreciably more water than those in other regions, so the total recommended dosage can be achieved with a single number instead of a range.

It should be noted that utilities wishing to reduce the amount of fluoride they add to water may need to consult with and get approval from their state regulatory agency. EPA regulations (specifically the Lead and Copper Rule) require that the primacy agency review and approve long term treatment changes to ensure they don't interfere with corrosion control. While some experts believe that reducing the fluoride dose will not have a significant affect on corrosion control, review by the state may still be required in many instances. EPA is working with state drinking water authorities to develop guidance and direction on this point. Furthermore, some states require the addition of fluoride unless a community opts out, and/or require that a utility choosing to fluoridate do so at a prescribed dose. Close consultation with the state is recommended in all cases.

EPA – Maximum Contaminant Level. As recommended by the National Research Council in 2006, EPA will reconsider the MCL for fluoride, currently 4.0 ppm. Today the Agency released two peer reviewed studies it will rely upon in that reconsideration: an exposure assessment and a dose-response assessment. As reiterated by both HHS and EPA, when fluoride is present at the proper amount it offers significant public health benefits in the form of protection against dental cavities. But it also occurs naturally and at higher levels may be associated with severe pitting of the teeth, a condition called severe dental fluorosis.

The dose response assessment concludes that the safe level of fluoride for a child still growing permanent teeth (age 8) is 0.08 mg/k/day. AWWA has done some math around this number and believes that depending upon the assumptions used this could translate into a Maximum Contaminant

Level Goal (MCLG) in the range of 1 ppm. EPA is required to set an MCL as close to the MCLG as is feasible, taking various things into consideration, including cost. In particular, the Agency can set an MCL at a level at which the costs are justified by the benefits.

It is likely that a revision in the MCL would fall most heavily on groundwater systems, and a significantly lower MCL could be expensive. According to EPA there are approximately two hundred public water systems – primarily very small utilities using ground water – that do not comply with the current MCL of 4 ppm.

You can find the HHS and EPA announcements at:

http://water.epa.gov/action/advisories/drinking/fluoride_index.cfm

<http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2011pres/01/20110107a.html>

Also, be advised that AWWA is adding a session to the Utility Management Conference (to be held February 8-11 in Denver), where we expect senior HHS and EPA officials to present on this issue. AWWA will also soon host a webcast on this topic. Please check our website for upcoming details on these events.

As always, please contact your AWWA Washington Office if you have questions or comments.