

Natural Resources Defense Council: “Staggering” health benefits from replacing lead water pipes could save Wisconsin billions from avoided health impacts

Posted on Wednesday, Oct 25, 2023

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Milwaukee, Wisconsin – Replacing every lead pipe that delivers drinking water to homes in Wisconsin would yield \$28-29 billion dollars in avoided health costs, according to a new state-by-state analysis released today from NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council). “[Getting the Lead Out](#)” finds that every state would reap enormous savings in avoided health costs – with nearly 90% of the savings coming from reduced cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the U.S.

“Decades ago, health risks led to a ban on lead from gasoline and paint, but lead remains widespread in drinking water across the nation. This is an urgent public health crisis, as tens of millions of people essentially drink water from a lead straw, unaware of the big risk to their health,” said [Erik D. Olson](#), **NRDC’s senior strategic director for health**, who authored the report. “We found staggering health and dollar benefits for removing lead water pipes. And water utilities that do nothing are essentially opting in favor of avoidable and costly health risks and even deaths.”

Federal rules for tap water adopted by the Trump Administration in 2021 failed to consider these enormous public health benefits. However, with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) poised to release a new rule regulating lead in drinking water in a few weeks, the agency is expected to require that all lead drinking water pipes be fully replaced.

If the over 300,000 lead service lines in the state are replaced, the financial benefits in avoided health costs in Wisconsin would be enormous.

“The costs of inaction far outweigh the costs – and dire public health consequences – of removing lead service lines from our Wisconsin communities. For too long, exposure to dangerous lead-contaminated drinking water has threatened our residents of Milwaukee and beyond. These numbers make it all the more clear that President Biden and the EPA must take action to protect our families and children by proposing a strong new federal regulation for lead in drinking water as soon as possible,” **said Robert Miranda, Member of Freshwater for Life Action Coalition (FLAC).**

The benefits of removing lead service lines, the lead pipes that connect homes to the water mains in the street, dwarf the costs by an enormous margin. EPA and the water utility trade association in the past have estimated the total cost of removing all 9.2 million lead service lines nationwide would be in the range of \$46 to \$56 billion. The total health savings of reducing lead levels in tap water would be orders of magnitude higher, according to a recent [Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health study](#). The study forecasts at least \$9 billion in annual health benefits from removing all lead pipes in the country, with total health savings of \$786 billion over the next 35 years.

NRDC recommendations include:

- The Biden-Harris administration, the EPA, states, and water utilities must make complete removal of every lead service line a top priority.
- The EPA’s improvements to the Lead and Copper Rule should require that all lead service lines be fully replaced by the water utilities within 10 years. “Partial” replacements of the lead service line should be banned, as that practice can actually increase lead exposure.
- The EPA rule should require water utilities to cover all the costs of full lead service line replacement to ensure low-income homeowners and renters get safe drinking water.
- State and local governments should access federal funding to help water systems get the lead out:
 - The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law makes a \$15 billion down payment to start getting lead service lines out of the ground.
 - Further funding is available through the Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act, and the American

Rescue Plan Act to help communities, especially disadvantaged communities, pay to replace their lead service lines.

- To avoid exacerbating water affordability issues, utilities should seek all available government funding and adopt water affordability programs (see the [Water Affordability Advocacy Toolkit by NRDC and the National Consumer Law Center](#)).

METHODOLOGY:

NRDC's report, "[Getting the Lead Out](#)," builds on a Harvard School of Public Health study that sought to quantify and monetize the full range of health benefits of reducing lead levels in drinking water. Other data points used to develop the state-by-state health benefits analysis were taken from [EPA's recent state survey](#) and [NRDC's 50-state survey](#) identifying the number of lead pipes in each state.

The Harvard study was published in July 2023 in the peer-reviewed scientific journal [Environmental Research](#) by Harvard researchers Ronnie Levin and Joel Schwartz. The authors are recognized lead experts who were formerly involved in developing EPA's estimates of the health benefits of reducing lead exposure.

The Harvard analysis shows that the EPA's January 2021 proposed plan to regulate lead in drinking water during the Trump Administration failed to consider the vast majority of the \$9.2 billion in annual health benefits that EPA's published scientific assessments found are caused by lead exposure. The study found the EPA had "developed a highly detailed and comprehensive cost analysis while ignoring 95 percent of the health effects it has determined are causally related to lead exposure." The study noted the EPA's 2021 analysis of the economic costs of addressing lead in water is 359 pages long while the discussion of health benefits totals 56 pages.