Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS)

PFAS: What Are They?
PFAS are a group of man-made chemicals that were developed in the 1940s to be fire, oil, grease, water and stain resistant. The chemicals are found in a wide array of consumer and industrial products, including non-stick cookware, stain repellant, dental floss, cleaning products and cosmetics. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the potential for health effects from PFAS in humans is not well understood.
For more information about PFAS, check out the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency site: (EPA) https://www.epa.gov/pfas.

How do these compounds get in the environment?
Some of the most common means of PFAS entering the environment are discharges from PFAS manufacturing and processing facilities, and from facilities that use the product in large quantities, such as airports and military installations. Fortunately, there are no known PFAS contaminated sites located upstream of WSSC Water drinking water sources.

PFAS can also enter the water cycle through use of household and industrial products, such as by washing a nonstick pan. Once discharged into the environment and into source water, PFAS compounds cannot be removed through conventional water treatment process. Two of the most common compounds, PFOA and PFOS, are very persistent in the human body and environment – meaning they do not break down and accumulate over time.

Are these compounds regulated by state/federal governments?
The EPA does not regulate PFAS compounds but maintains four health advisories. Two of the most common PFAS compounds, PFOA and PFOS, have respective interim health advisories of 0.004 parts per trillion (ppt) and 0.02 ppt. In addition, final EPA health advisories exist at 2,000 ppt for PFBS and 10 ppt for HFPO-DA aka GenX. Currently, these are the only federal health standard. In addition, the Maryland Department of Health issued a state health advisory for PFHxS of 140 ppt. One part per trillion is equivalent to one drop of water in 20 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

WSSC Water Actions
WSSC Water has an aggressive water quality testing program - performing 500,000 laboratory tests per year to ensure safety and superior water quality. WSSC Water has never had a drinking water quality violation in its more than 104-year history. Regarding PFAS, WSSC Water conducted extensive water quality testing for six PFAS compounds, from July 2013 through April 2014 and again from March 2015 through October 2017, and found no detectable levels of these contaminants in our drinking water supply. Results are posted at www.wsscwater.com/pfas.

On January 24, 2020, WSSC Water announced it would resume quarterly testing its water for the presence of 18 PFAS substances at its Potomac and Patuxent Water Filtration Plants. In September 2022, WSSC proactively increased PFAS monitoring from 18 to 29 compounds ahead of new EPA monitoring guidelines. These two plants provide drinking water to 1.9 million residents in Montgomery and Prince George's counties. This proactive measure goes above and beyond federal and state requirements. Test results are posted at www.wsscwater.com/pfas.

Next Steps
Given the challenges of removing PFAS, the most effective way to limit their occurrence in drinking water is by regulating upstream polluters. WSSC Water will continue to closely monitor the national discussion on the need for possible federal PFAS testing and the progress of scientific knowledge on this issue.

Questions

If you have questions about drinking water quality, please call WSSC Water's Emergency Call Center: at 301-206-4002 or contact waterqualityinquiry@wsscwater.com. More information about EPA's action related to PFOA and PFOS is available at https://www.epa.gov/sdwa/drinking-water-health-advisories-pfoa-and-pfos. If you are concerned about potential health effects from exposure to PFAS at low levels, we encourage you to contact your doctor or health care professional.