

Reference

**Subject:** Draft EPA statement lowers safe level for perchlorate

**Date:** Tue, 22 Jan 2002 10:50:31 -0600

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FYI

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01/19/02	
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This article also covers the story very well. Thanks to John, Mike, Bruce and Keith for taking this call.

Lisa

from the Las Vegas Review Journal 1/19/02  
[http://www.lvrj.com/lvrj\\_home/2002/Jan-19-Sat-2002/news/17909766.html](http://www.lvrj.com/lvrj_home/2002/Jan-19-Sat-2002/news/17909766.html)

Draft EPA statement lowers safe level for perchlorate  
By STEVE TETREULT  
STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- A draft Environmental Protection Agency risk assessment released Friday suggests the safest levels of the toxic chemical perchlorate in drinking water may be well below what has been detected near intakes at Lake Mead that supply Southern Nevada with its water.

In a 556-page study, a team of federal scientists put forward a hypothesis that perchlorate might be safely consumed at levels of about 1 part per billion over long periods without causing damage to health.

That is significantly lower than levels ranging from 4 ppb to 32 ppb that water agencies have been using as unofficial federal guidelines since the government began assessing the health risks of the rocket fuel ingredient in the mid-1990s.

EPA and Nevada officials stressed Friday the draft risk assessment is a conservative estimate, is couched with cautions and has not been subject to external peer review and public comment.

A final assessment is expected in late summer, and then it would amount to one piece of a larger EPA process to determine an official maximum contaminant level for perchlorate that could take years.

"We're a little bit leery about getting excited about this 1 ppb until it has gone through the review process and they finalize it," said Brenda Pohlmann, chief of Las Vegas operations for the state Environmental Protection Division. One part per billion is equivalent to about one grain of sand in three backyard swimming pools, Pohlmann has said.

"We don't think people should have short-term concerns about consuming water in Southern Nevada," said J.C. Davis, spokesman for the Southern Nevada Water

Authority.

Davis and his boss, water authority administrator Patricia Mulroy, said ongoing perchlorate cleanup from the Las Vegas Wash is expected to reduce the toxin to "below-detectable" levels by the end of the year.

The current detection level achievable by most labs is 4 ppb, officials said, although methods to detect to 1 ppb are becoming more available.

In mid-December, the water authority measured perchlorate at 14 ppb near intake valves at Lake Mead, Davis said. Measurements taken weekly in 2001 averaged 10 ppb, he said.

Bruce Macler, a drinking water program toxicologist with EPA's regional office in San Francisco, said the perchlorate assessment "is worrisome from a health standpoint."

"The risk assessment we put a lot of effort into," he said. "The risk studies themselves were carefully thought through. Now you put the pieces together and it doesn't look good. It shows these are not good signs for the chemical."

The EPA has scheduled a public peer review workshop on the draft assessment on March 5-6 in Sacramento.

Officials said the EPA's progress on the issue probably will prod water districts to re-examine strategies for removing perchlorate from their supplies. The draft pleased environmentalists who have asserted that drinking water should contain no more than 4.3 parts per billion.

"States that are in the process of looking at their own standards are certainly going to take this as a very strong signal from the agency," said Bill Walker of the Environmental Working Group. Nevada does not have a safety limit for perchlorate in drinking water.

The EPA report suggests a "draft reference dose" of how much perchlorate humans can consume in a lifetime without harming thyroid gland functions that control growth and metabolism. The study then hypothesized a rough equivalent of 1 part per billion for an adult who would be drinking two liters of water daily.

"The (reference dose) estimates are not intended to serve as a 'bright line,'" the study cautioned. It called for further research.

EPA officials and others said it might be three to five years before the agency proposes federal limits on perchlorate exposure.

The action is the latest step in the government's effort to gauge the health implications of perchlorate, a chemical used as a primary ingredient in solid rocket fuel. EPA has reports of perchlorate contamination in 20 states and has documented perchlorate manufacturers or users in 40 states.

Two plants near Henderson produced an ammonium perchlorate compound that seeped into groundwater over a period of decades. One of the companies, Kerr-McGee Corp., has been involved in cleanup since November 1999.

Kerr-McGee has been extracting perchlorate from water near an outlet to Las Vegas Wash, treating it with a resin that destroys the pollutant. As of last March, more than 700,000 pounds of the rocket fuel ingredient had been removed from the water supply, water officials said.

Kerr McGee in March is scheduled to begin operating a second removal system, the water authority's Davis said.

"We're far ahead of the curve from the rest of the country on remediation," he said. "We are literally months away from removing virtually all the perchlorate at its sources."

At that point, perchlorate in Lake Mead and downstream in the Colorado River would theoretically flush itself out, a process that still could take several years, said John Kemmerer, an acting Superfund division director in California.