Is My Water Safe to Drink? PFAS, Emerging Contaminants, and Related Issues

Water for All Summit
Catawba-Wateree Water Management Group
Mike McGill, President
You must become or stay THE GO-TO source for information about your drinking water.
Old Days, Old Ways are OVER

• Old mindset: “Customers don’t know what I know about water.” “I’ll tell them what I want when I want.”

• Old scar tissue: “Why should I stick my neck out? The press only cares about a bad bill or a bad break.”

• “Out of sight? Out of mind? Fine by me.”
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- Old scar tissue: “Why should I stick my neck out? The press only cares about a bad bill or a bad break.”
- Thanks to social media, those days are OVER.
- We live in The Instant Information Age.
- Stick with OLD mindset? Playing Russian Roulette with reputation.
- Not talking days or weeks of damage. Talking YEARS.
PFAS & Emerging Contaminants

• So what are PFAS & ECs? Why are we here?
• ECs = Chemicals detected/being detected in trace amounts largely due to advances in water testing
• Risks to health & environment not yet understood
• Little - if any - health/medical data on almost all of them
• EPA "conservative" estimate: 4,500 in nation’s source waters
PFAS & Emerging Contaminants

- **PFAS** = Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances

- **Man-made chemicals produced since 1940s**
  - Think Teflon & Gore-Tex. Anything water/stain-resistant.
  - Fire-fighting foam. Discoveries near airbases, airports.
  - Just found in Oral-B Glide dental floss
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• **Persistent in the environment & ALL OF US. 99.7% of us.**

• **PFOA & PFOS: 2 PFAS phasing out due to associations with adverse health risks. Cancer, thyroid, pregnancy impacts.**
  *NO drinking water standards.*
PFAS & Emerging Contaminants

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- Flint. Shook public confidence across the country.
- Shorthand for almost ANY water quality issue
- Like Flint, PFAS/EC news could create doubt anywhere
- 1000s of chemicals are in our nation’s water supplies
- Found in unexpected places, at unexpected times
- Utilities caught off-guard: Reputations can be wiped out in days
GenX: NC’s PFAS

- 2016 NC State study, with cooperation of water utility:
  - Found several PFASs in Cape Fear River downstream from Chemours plant
  - Drinking water levels well above EPA’s “lifetime health advisory” of 70 ppt
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Wilmington NC = Flint MI
GEN X
How Did We Get Here?

• Personal use & discharges into water, air
  • Discharges allowed w/little data required
  • Regulatory processes little more than the Honor System
  • Most WTPs can’t remove PFAS. Move right through plants.
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- “Discovery Cycle” *(To protect public health.)*
  - Fund water testing? Gain news-making, legislative results. Leads to more funding. Likely to gain...
  - NC Collaboratory: ”Create early warning system”
  - Pace of regulatory guidance lags behind
    - UCMRs. 30 at a time. Doesn’t mean we get MCLs.
    - Federal and state health advisories shifting
At @NCCULAW forum: @DukeEnvironment Prof Ferguson: preventing more #GenX crises requires weekly/monthly testing of public h2O to create “alarm system” so Public & govt & biz can respond when a pollutant appears nCGA #ncpol

7:51 PM - 22 Mar 2018

At @NCCULAW #genx forum: @DukeEnvironment Prof Ferguson says w/o an “alarm system’ to detect pollution there’s no way to prevent undetected public consumption of chems like #GenX in our #water #ncpol nCGA

7:56 PM - 22 Mar 2018
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How? Proactive Communications

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- Need to work with the media. WQA: In 2015, 27% of customers said they learned about contaminants from news media. 2017? 43%.
PFAS & EC Preparations

- Number #1 Rule: Put yourself in your customers’ shoes
- J.D. Power: Nearly 1/3 of customers report a “water quality issue”
- Biggest mistake: Arrogance. “You’ll know what we want, when we want.”
- All trust can be wiped out by ONE headline
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• Create COMMS plan for PFAS & EC discoveries:
  • You’ll be ready whenever/however a story makes news
  • Use “planned transparency.” Helps you gain trust while exercising control.
  • Contains vetted customer information for multiple platforms
  • Incorporates community, social media relationships
PFAS & EC Messages

• Lead with messages supporting your important, expert role
• “Based on our knowledge, experience, duty to protect public health”:
  • Water is our life. We share concerns about these discoveries.
  • Your water meets/exceeds federal & state standards for safety, quality
  • We’re taking action. We will continue to deliver safe, clean water.
  • Important information always available from us. It’s our responsibility.
  • Whenever you are concerned, we’re here. Ask us.
  • Stay informed, but use credible sources. Be careful with social media.
PFAS & EC Messages

• “Our Duty”
  • Hard-working people dedicated to delivering safe, clean water to you. 24/7/365.
  • We drink the water too. We wouldn’t provide water our families shouldn’t drink.

• “Working for you”
  • Water is our life. This is our job for the communities we serve.
  • Working on solutions with regulatory agencies, industry leaders, scientists

• “Perspective”
  • Explain what EPA & state health advisories are, what they mean
  • Testing advances finding “compounds” at parts per trillion levels
    • One second in 32,000 years
    • The first six inches on a trip to the Sun
    • One drop of food coloring in 18 MILLION gallons of water
Summary

• PFAS & EC Issues are NOT going away
  • Advances in water testing
  • Slow regulatory processes
  • “Discovery Cycle”

• Need to prepare now:
  • Proactive communications boost public trust
  • Build/strengthen customer relationships, including social media
  • Develop a PFAS & EC COMMS plan

• Respect the customer. Planned transparency. Gains control & trust.
• Use “Our Duty,” “Working for You,” & “Perspective” messages
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WaterPIO.com

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