

The PFAS rule fight isn't the story. What happens after it is

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On July 7, the EPA held a public hearing on two proposals that would reshape federal drinking water standards for



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PFAS, the class of chemicals commonly known as forever chemicals. At the hearing, Environmental Protection Network Policy Director Michelle Montoya testified that the

proposed rollback disregards established science on cumulative PFAS exposure — one of several voices arguing the process is moving faster than the underlying risk assessment.

One proposal would give utilities two extra years to meet the existing limits on PFOA and PFOS. The other would rescind the standards altogether for four other PFAS compounds on the grounds that the prior rule skipped a required legal step.

Coverage of this fight has largely focused on the politics: whether this is a rollback or a correction, a win for polluters or relief for struggling utilities. I run a company that designs and builds pollution abatement systems, and I want to offer a different lens, because in my experience, the debate over what the rule says has never been the part that determines what happens to the water.

Here is what does not change no matter how the rulemaking shakes out: PFAS does not degrade. It is called a forever chemical because it persists in soil, water and the human body for years, sometimes decades. The compounds under discussion last week were regulated in the first place because the underlying science showed real health risks, and that science has not moved even as the compliance deadlines have.

So when a rule extends a deadline or narrows its scope, it changes the legal timeline. It does not change the chemistry. And it does not change what a responsible utility or industrial discharger needs to be doing right now.

I have spent years working with water systems and manufacturers who treat regulatory deadlines as the finish line. That is a mistake, and last week is a good illustration of why. The EPA has been explicit that if it rescinds the current standards for PFHxS, PFNA, GenX, and the related mixture limit, it intends to revisit those chemicals through a proper rulemaking process, and has said the result could be more stringent than what exists today. In other words, the four-year reprieve some utilities may celebrate this month could turn into a tighter standard a few years from now, applied to systems that spent the interim doing nothing.

The same logic applies to the two-year extension for PFOA and PFOS. The four parts per trillion limit is not going away. It is staying exactly where it is. All that is changing is how much runway certain utilities get to reach it. Utilities that use that runway to plan, budget and install real treatment capacity will be in a fundamentally different position in 2031 than those that treat the extension as a reason to wait.

There is also a piece of this story that predates last week's hearing and will outlast it. PFOA and PFOS are still designated hazardous substances under federal Superfund law, a designation the current EPA has said it does not intend to unwind. That means cleanup liability and cost recovery exposure exist independently of whatever happens to the

drinking water standards. A utility or manufacturer that is only tracking the Safe Drinking Water Act rulemaking is watching one piece of a larger board.

None of this is an argument against public comment or against the process that took place last week. It was worth having. Communities affected by PFAS contamination deserve to be heard, and utilities — especially small and rural systems with limited budgets — deserve a workable timeline. Both things can be true at once. What I would caution against is mistaking a shifting deadline for a shifting risk. The risk has been constant. Only the paperwork has moved.

If there is a lesson in last week's hearing for the people who actually operate water systems and industrial facilities, it is this: build for the chemistry, not for the calendar. Standards will keep being negotiated, litigated, and revisited, because that is what happens with a contaminant this widespread and this political. The organizations that come out ahead will be the ones that used every extension as time to build real capacity, not as permission to stop planning.