

Question on Notice

No. 974

Asked on 22 August 2024

MS S BOLTON ASKED MINISTER FOR HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH AND AMBULANCE SERVICES AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN (HON S FENTIMAN)—

QUESTION

With reference to ongoing concerns regarding toxic levels of chemicals within tap water across Australia including Queensland and New South Wales being raised again— Will the Minister advise (a) what is currently being undertaken to ensure that levels of PFAS and other chemicals do not exceed what has been determined as safe levels and (b) will a review be undertaken regarding the existing Queensland Public Health water supply standards?

ANSWER

Australia has national drinking water guidelines, set by the National Health and Medical Research Council and published in the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines. These guidelines contain health-based guideline values for hundreds of commonly used chemicals that may be found in drinking water. Queensland adopts these national guidelines as our drinking water standards in the Public Health Regulation 2018.

Recent concern regarding chemicals in drinking water has been focused on what are known as PFAS or per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances. These have been referred to as 'forever chemicals' as they take a long time to break down in the environment and can remain in the human body for months to years.

I am advised all Queensland drinking water service providers must notify the Queensland Water Supply Regulator within 24 hours whenever they detect a chemical above the health-based guideline value contained in the drinking water guidelines. This requirement applies to PFAS chemicals as well. If the treated drinking water exceeds any drinking water standard, the service provider must then take appropriate steps to ensure the ongoing safety of their drinking water supply.

The Australian Drinking Water Guidelines are subject to what is known as 'rolling revision'. This means that they are updated regularly in response to emerging scientific evidence as to the safety of drinking water. The current guideline values for the three most common PFAS chemicals were added to the drinking water guidelines following a review in 2018. Since that time there has been increasing concern as to the safety of certain PFAS chemicals and, in response, the National Health and Medical Research Council has been working for over a year to review and update the PFAS health-based guideline values.

I am advised this process is reaching its conclusion and the draft new guideline values will be released for public consultation in October this year. Queensland will adopt the new guideline values once public consultation has concluded and they have been published in the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines.

Queensland Health has also been working with the Department of Environment, Science and Innovation to support a number of other Commonwealth and State agencies on investigations into legacy PFAS contamination of groundwater, including the Department of Defence, Airservices Australia, Queensland Fire Department and CS Energy.