

Solving Systemic Water Problems

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As Americans, we are conditioned to believe that our individual choices make a difference. Perhaps that is part of the reason that our nation has ignored public infrastructure for so long, leading to a [dirty water crisis](#) that requires communal action.

Some of us may be able to purchase bottled water. But even for those who can afford it, [bottled water is not a sustainable choice](#), and it comes with its own [health risks](#). Fortunately, the environmental movement has a long [history of success](#) through collective action. But before you can act, you need to know what must be done.

Here are some steps the U.S. needs to take to clean up its water act.

Increase Regulation of Polluters

A decade after the EPA discovered more than [200 unregulated chemicals](#) in U.S. drinking water, the current administration has made it even easier for industries to ignore the risk of their operations to human health.

Among other [anti-environmental actions](#), EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler proposed a limit for two of the most prevalent [PFAS chemicals](#) that is six times higher than the amount deemed safe by scientists. Despite evidence that stricter [regulations do make water safer](#), he is also working to [undo the previous administration's definition of waters protected](#) by the Clean Water Act. The new EPA definition of protected waters would remove protection from at least 18 percent of streams and 51 percent of wetlands across the country.

Proposed EPA regulations are almost always open to the public for comment, typically for 30-90 days after the date of publication in the Federal Register. You can access rule making information and submit comments [online](#).

While these two changes are not currently open for comment, keep in mind that the EPA administrator is a presidentially appointed position. Your 2020 vote for president is also a vote for the kind of EPA you want for the next four years.

Invest in Water Treatment Infrastructure

The EPA is responsible for regulating pollutants, but your local municipality is responsible for delivering potable water to your pipes. Unfortunately, thousands of rural and even urban communities throughout the country are [out of compliance](#) with federal water safety standards — and many of them don't even test their water quality.

If you've looked into [your local water supply](#) and found problems, local activism can be [very successful](#) in focusing government budgeting priorities on public health. But the communities with outdated systems — or none at all — are disproportionately

minority and low-income areas that don't have sufficient budgets to reallocate. Some [federal funding is available](#) to help local governments invest in water infrastructure. Obtaining those funds is not a trivial process, though.

Most local governments will still need to feel public pressure before committing the resources to pursue available grants. You can apply that pressure in several ways:

- Write your representatives, including members of your local water board or commission, city and county council members, as well as state and federal legislators.
- Start a petition. Change.org provides free tools for setting and and sharing a petition. Make your petition clear, focused on a specific issue, and help signers share their feelings with the officials who can make a change.
- Vote. Despite everything we hear about our helplessness, our votes matter.
- Shop consciously and make your friends and family aware of local water issues. Our spending supports these poor water systems, so make sure your dollars come with clear requirements about the safety and quality for the water you drink.

Update Unsafe Water Delivery Systems

Sometimes the source of contamination is the pipes water passes through after treatment. A

lthough current building codes forbid the use of lead in plumbing, many cities, like [Newark, New Jersey](#), still supply water through old lead pipes. Water treatment facilities can treat water to make it less corrosive to lead and copper pipes, but if lead pipes are still in use, residents should be provided with water filters until the city can replace them. About [one-third](#) of the country's water districts are still using supply pipes that contain lead.

It should be obvious, but residents need to tell their city and county governments that providing safe water is their first priority.

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