



Fact Sheet

Safe Drinking Water Act - a summary

January 2017

Origins of the act

The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) was established to protect the quality of drinking water in the U.S. This law focuses on all waters actually or potentially designed for drinking use, whether from above ground or underground sources.

SDWA authorizes EPA to establish minimum standards to protect tap water and requires all owners or operators of public water systems to comply with these primary (health-related) standards. The 1996 amendments to SDWA require that EPA consider a detailed risk and cost assessment, and best available peer-reviewed science, when developing these standards. State governments also encourage attainment of secondary standards (nuisance-related). Under the Act, EPA also establishes minimum standards for state programs to protect underground sources of drinking water from endangerment by underground injection of fluids.

Highlights of the Safe Drinking Water Act

- Authorizes EPA to set enforceable health standards for contaminants in drinking water
- Requires public notification of water systems violations and annual consumer confidence reports to customers on contaminant levels found in their drinking water
- Establishes a federal-state partnership for regulation enforcement
- Includes provisions specifically designed to protect underground sources of drinking water
- Requires disinfection of surface water supplies, except those with pristine, protected sources
- Establishes a multibillion-dollar state revolving loan fund for water system upgrades
- Requires an assessment of the vulnerability of all drinking water sources to contamination
- SDWA applies to every public water system in the United States.

National Drinking Water Regulations

A key component of SDWA is the requirement that the EPA promulgate national primary drinking water regulations for contaminants that may pose health risks and that are likely to be present in public water supplies. Section 1412 instructs the EPA on how to select contaminants for regulation and specifies how the EPA must establish regulations once a contaminant has been selected.

The EPA has issued regulations for more than 90 contaminants, including regulations setting new standards for drinking water disinfectants and their byproducts, and for microbial contaminants.

Kentucky holds primacy

Section 1413 authorizes states to assume primary over sight and enforcement responsibility (primacy) for public water systems. To assume primacy, states must adopt regulations at least as stringent as national requirements, develop adequate procedures for enforcement, adopt authority for administrative penalties, maintain records and develop a plan for providing safe drinking water under emergency circumstances. Kentucky is one of the 55 of 57 states and territories that have primacy authority for the public water system supervision (PWSS) program.