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DuPont must cut exposure to PFOA

EPA lowers amount allowed in drinking water in parts of Ohio, W.Va.

By JEFF MONTGOMERY, The News Journal

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The DuPont Co. and federal regulators have agreed on a drastically lower contamination limit for some West Virginia and Ohio drinking-water supplies tainted with a chemical used in making stick- and stain-resistant products.

Environmental Protection Agency officials said the agreement would drop the "action" trigger level to 0.5 parts per billion of perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA, for any public or private drinking-water system around DuPont's Washington Works site in Parkersburg, W.Va. -- down from 150 parts per billion set in an EPA order in 2002.

Environmental groups in New Jersey immediately called for similar action near DuPont plants in that state that handle PFOA.

But Donald S. Welsh, the EPA mid-Atlantic regional administrator, said federal officials based their action on discovery of higher-than-normal levels of PFOA in the blood of Parkersburg-area residents.

"It is a site-specific action level. It is based on the data that's available about the prevalence of C-8 in the environment and in the blood serum of the citizens in that community," Welsh said. "It does not apply elsewhere."

Welsh said the lower action levels would "protect local public health while EPA completes a risk assessment for PFOA."

PFOA, sometimes called C8, is used to make DuPont's Teflon products and thousands of other industrial and consumer goods, including coatings for food packaging.

An EPA advisory panel has recommended listing PFOA as a "probable" cancer-causing agent. The chemical has been under intense public scrutiny for years, since researchers found the long-lived compound in the bloodstreams of humans and animals around the globe.

"We agree with the EPA that exposures should be reduced among residents in the local West Virginia and Ohio communities through the establishment of this precautionary level for drinking water," said Bill Hopkins, Washington Works plant manager.

Although complaints about PFOA contamination have cropped up near factories operated by DuPont and other companies, including near DuPont's Chambers Works plant in Deepwater, N.J., officials said the agreement was confined to the Parkersburg area.

"It's short-sighted on the part of the EPA to make this apply only to the Washington Works region," said Tracy Carluccio, a member of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network conservation group. "DuPont is well aware that PFOA has been found in drinking water around the Chamber Works and Paramus facility."

New Jersey is considering its own standards for PFOA in drinking water.

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