



Hermiston Herald, File

McNary Dam in Umatilla is among the 150 sites selected by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and Oregon Health Authority for water sampling to test for the presence of PFAS contamination.

OHA, DEQ set to monitor 150 drinking water systems

PFAS, called 'forever chemicals,' are thought to present a danger to humans

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

The state of Oregon plans to test 150 drinking water systems across the state for the presence of PFAS, or per- and poly-fluorinated substances.

PFAS are a family of chemicals that do not break down in the environment or in human bodies. These "forever chemicals" are linked to cancer, reduced fertility in women and delayed development in infants and children, among other adverse health effects.

The chemicals have been used since the 1940s and are found in thousands of household and commercial items, such as nonstick pots and pans, waterproof clothing and firefighting foam agents.

Of those 150 sites to be tested, 17 are in Northeastern Oregon, including 11 in Umatilla County and two in Union County. Baker, Grant, Morrow and Wallowa counties each have one testing site.

"We took a look at all the small public water systems, those that serve fewer than 10,000 because the big ones have already been sampled, and we looked at places where there might have been potential — and I'm underlying potential — PFAS sources," said Harry Esteve, communication manager for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. "We overlaid those on the maps of water systems and selected that list of 150."

The Northeastern Oregon testing sites include the cities of Irrigon, Pendleton, Milton-Freewater, Elgin, John Day and Joseph.

Also among the sites are the Ash Grove cement manufacturing site in Baker City, the Amazon data center in Umatilla and the Sacajawea Mobile Home Park in La Grande.

Results from the first few collection sites should be finished and analyzed by the end of November. Of the 150 sites across the state, only 20 have been sampled so far, according to Esteve.

"Samples from the first 20 public water systems have been collected. We made a list of the 150 we are going to sample eventually, over time, but we started with 20 — and frankly we started with those because they were kind of near our lab, which is in Hillsboro," Esteve said. "So we can get out there quickly and get some results a little bit more quickly. Travel is still a little bit on the iffy side, given the delta variant."

Testing then and now

This is not the first time Oregon has tested its water systems for the presence of the chemicals. Between 2013 and 2015, a study from the Oregon Health

Authority tested all major public drinking water systems in Oregon cities with more than 10,000 residents and did not detect harmful amounts of the PFAS chemicals included in the testing. So far, Oregonians do not seem to be exposed to these chemicals in harmful amounts through their water, according to the OHA.

According to the OHA, some plants, such as grasses, can absorb contamination when they are fertilized with PFAS-contaminated material from wastewater treatment plants.

This has resulted in cows producing contaminated milk in some dairy farms in the U.S. There also is evidence that when surface water is contaminated, certain PFAS compounds can accumulate in fish.

In the 2013-15 study, 65 sites were tested for six PFAS chemicals. The Oregon DEQ and the Oregon Health Authority now are testing 150 sites for up to 25 PFAS chemicals. The partnership between the DEQ and OHA seeks to crack down on PFAS contamination that could end up in drinking water, a primary concern to both agencies.

"The most likely pathway into the human body is through drinking water, and that's why we're doing this proactively — taking a look and seeing what's in the water," Esteve said.

Paying for the test

A grant through the federal Environmental Protection Agency is paying for the analysis, and the DEQ's laboratory will analyze the drinking water samples for 25 PFAS compounds, at no cost to local cities.

If tested, most people in the U.S. would be found to have PFAS in their blood, according to the Oregon Health Authority. However, testing for PFAS exposure is expensive, and not likely to be covered by insurance.

According to OHA, long-term exposure to PFAS chemicals can affect growth, learning and behavior of infants and children, interfere with the body's hormones, increase cholesterol levels, affect the immune system and increase the risk of some kinds of cancer.

The DEQ has not yet set a date for the completion of the testing in the 150 Oregon locations. Results from testing can take upward of a month between collection and a finished analysis, according to Esteve.

"This is the pilot. These first 20 we want to see how that goes," Esteve said. "And then based on how that worked and what results we get, that will inform the timetable going forward."

Thanksgiving travel projected to bounce back to pre-pandemic levels

AAA predicts hundreds of thousands of Oregonians to travel by car and plane

By DAVIS CARBAUGH
EO Media Group

Roads may be heavily congested again for this year's Thanksgiving travels, according to projections from the American Automobile Association.

AAA predicts that 53.4 million Americans will travel for the holiday, which is a rise of 13% from the numbers in 2020. With travel numbers nearing that of 2019, the projected boost in travel is expected to be the largest single-year increase since 2005.

"Travel is again high on the list for Americans who are looking forward to spending time with family and friends this Thanksgiving," AAA Public Affairs Director Marie Dodds said. "But it means travelers should plan for roads and airports to be noticeably more crowded than what we experienced during the pandemic."

The projections from AAA show that roughly 16.2% of the entire American population will travel for Thanksgiving, while approximately 17.7% of Oregon citizens will traverse. That percentage comes out to about 746,000 Oregonians traveling for turkey day.

In 2019, approximately 49.9 million Americans



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

Semis and other vehicles line Island Avenue in La Grande on Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2021, waiting to get back on the road. An early accident on I-84 east of Pendleton blocked westbound lanes at around 9:30 a.m. State transportation officials are predicting road congestion over the Thanksgiving holiday season as well.

traveled by automobile, 4.6 million flew and 1.5 million traveled by public transportation. Due to a severe drop in travel due to COVID-19 in 2020, roughly 5.5 million less automobile travelers hit the road and air travel was cut in half by just over two million.

As this Thanksgiving approaches, AAA predicts that 652,000 Oregonians will travel via automobile and 86,000 will fly.

A steep rise in gasoline prices over the last year is having an impact on projections, but not to a large extent. AAA notes that the gas prices are not seen as a means to limiting travel, as those hitting the road will cut costs elsewhere.

Gas prices are roughly \$1 more per gallon than during last year's Thanksgiving holiday.

"Gas prices aren't keeping people home," Dodds said. "Those who need to trim expenses will do so in other ways such as limiting dining out and looking for more budget-friendly choices in accommodations and other activities."

Upon travel returning to a fuller extent this year, AAA is reporting that hotel rates are up nearly 50% and rental car rates have risen by about 4%.

The top travel spots for AAA Oregon members are Anaheim, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, San Diego and Maui.

According to AAA, the organization will receive roughly 8,200 calls for road assistance over the holiday. The top issues typically involve dead batteries, flat tires and lockouts.

AAA urges caution and planning ahead for this Thanksgiving, noting that busy roads and airports should be expected. According to the organization's website, those who travel by airplane should expect full flights.

The official Thanksgiving holiday travel period is defined as Nov. 24-28. AAA predicts that the busiest travel days will take place on the Tuesday and Wednesday before Thanksgiving.

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