

# **MEDIA RELEASE: NEW DRAFT DRINKING WATER GUIDELINES FOR PFAS WILL MAINTAIN SAFE DRINKING WATER**

The Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) has welcomed the release of the draft updated Australian Drinking Water Guidelines on PFAS by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

The draft guidelines propose health-protective levels for four PFAS:

- lower levels for the three types of PFAS in the current guidelines (PFOS, PFOA, PFHxS)
- a new level for an additional PFAS chemical – PFBS.

PFAS chemicals have been manufactured in the United States, Europe and Asia since the 1950s. Though not made in Australia, the chemicals have been widely used here in industrial and consumer products such as firefighting foams, pesticides, fertilisers, carpet, paint, frying pans, make-up, sunscreen, clothes, food packaging and other everyday items.

PFAS chemicals are not added to drinking water but very small amounts can be present in water due to contamination from external sources in the environment and these consumer products.

Water Services Association of Australia Executive Director Adam Lovell said the water sector supported the thorough scientific process used to set the guidelines.

**“Australia has some of the highest quality drinking water in the world,” Mr Lovell said.**

**“For most of us, drinking water is sourced from well-protected, often pristine catchments, or it goes through multiple barrier treatment processes.**

**“Protecting water quality and public health is the highest priority for water providers around the country, working closely with federal and state health regulators.**

**“The Australian Drinking Water Guidelines and the continual expert review process are part of our rigorous, independent and scientific system that helps ensure drinking water is safe.**

**“We support the ongoing review of these guidelines, to ensure they are based on the latest science and methods for the Australian context, to help maintain high quality drinking water across the country.**

**“The NHMRC members are the experts in their fields. They are advised by our top independent health, epidemiology and toxicology experts.**

**“The most important message is that consumers can have confidence in their drinking water – as the NHMRC advised, the risk from PFAS in drinking water is low for most Australians, your water is safe if it meets the guidelines.**

## **Media enquiries**

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**“Most water supplies in Australia are below the current and proposed guideline values. But utilities will remain vigilant, and continue to monitor water and share information with regulators and the community.**

**“In isolated instances where water is outside the values, the NHMRC has indicated that short-term exposure to higher levels is unlikely to pose a health risk. Nonetheless, we will take swift action in consultation with health authorities. The NHMRC noted this should not be seen as a pass/fail measure, rather a trigger to investigate.**

**“We didn’t create PFAS, but we are working to make sure it doesn’t impact our customers.**

The Australian Drinking Water Guidelines set strict health-based levels for numerous water quality measures, including PFAS substances. The levels are for long term exposure to these substances – over an entire lifetime. The Australian levels are extremely conservative and relate to nanograms, or parts per trillion. One nanogram is about one drop in 20 Olympic swimming pools. State and Territory health and water utilities use the guidelines and set the testing regimes and management plans ensuring drinking water is safe.

**“With PFAS, the risks relate to exposure over a lifetime, from a range of sources.**

**“The current guideline values for PFAS in drinking water are already very low. The proposed change has been instigated by national health regulators as global scientific understanding of PFAS continues to evolve.**

**“It is not unusual to see different guidelines values in different countries – this arises from different contexts and different approaches to assessing risk.**

Manufacturers in the United States have pledged to phase down production of PFAS chemicals. In Australia, the Federal Government has banned the production or importation of some PFAS substances by July next year, including everyday products that contain PFAS.

**“Import and manufacture bans on PFAS, and appropriate source controls on products containing PFAS, are key to limiting human exposure to PFAS and the amount entering the environment, including our drinking water catchments,” continued Mr Lovell.**

The NHMRC is [seeking feedback](#) on the new draft Australian Drinking Water Guidelines.

**“The water sector supports the NHMRC review and public consultation process. WSAA and its members will undertake a thorough review of the draft guidelines and provide any feedback, including on how they can be best implemented.”**

Please see next page for details on new guidelines

#### **About Water Services Association of Australia**

The Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) is the peak body representing the water sector. Our members provide water and wastewater services to over 24 million customers in Australia and New Zealand and many of Australia’s largest industrial and commercial enterprises.

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## New draft guidelines for PFAS levels in Australian Drinking Water Guidelines

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has today released updated draft Australian Drinking Water Guidelines values for four types of PFAS chemicals in Australian drinking water. The guidelines indicate how much PFAS in drinking water a person can consume over their lifetime, without any increased risk to their health.

The NHMRC is an independent statutory body made up of Australia's leading expert body in health and medical research. It is made up of State and Commonwealth Chief Medical Officers, public health officials and other medical professionals. Its review of the guidelines is led by a committee of independent experts in the areas of water quality, water chemistry, microbiology, toxicology and other leading scientists. The review process for PFAS has been taking place since 2022.

State and territory-based health authorities and water utilities follow the guidelines and set testing and treatment practices across treated drinking water sources.

NHMRC indicated that concentrations of PFAS below the proposed guideline values would not be expected to result in any significant risk to health over a lifetime of consumption. Short-term exposure to higher levels of PFAS is unlikely to change this risk. The draft guidelines are health-protective and include assumptions appropriate to the Australian context. The health-based guideline values are very conservative, and include a range of uncertainty factors, which always err on the side of caution.

### New draft guidelines for PFAS chemicals

Chemical	Existing ADWG level	Draft updated level
PFOS	70 ng/L or 70 parts per trillion (Less than 0.07 micrograms per litre of PFOS and PFHxS combined)	4 ng/L (Less than 0.004 micrograms per litre)
PFHxS		30 ng/L (Less than 0.03 micrograms per litre)
PFOA	560 ng/L, or 560 parts per trillion (Less than 0.56 micrograms per litre)	200 ng/L (Less than 0.2 micrograms per litre)
PFBS	-	1000 ng/L (Less than 1.0 micrograms per litre)

One nanogram per litre (ng/L), or one thousandth of a microgram ( $\mu\text{g}$ ) per litre, is the same as one part per trillion (ppt). It equals roughly one drop in 20 Olympic sized swimming pools.

### Water Quality testing

Water utilities in each state and territory regularly test drinking water to ensure it is safe for the public to consume. Testing plans are set in consultation with health regulators. Testing covers a wide range of physical, chemical and biological characteristics at all stages of the supply system. Testing and analysis is performed to strict guidelines to prevent cross contamination of samples.

Recent test results confirm that treated drinking water across the country is within the existing PFAS guideline levels - and in almost all cases meets the new draft guidelines.

In light of the draft guidelines, in consultation with their health regulators, water utilities across the country will review their testing practices for PFAS chemicals or undertake new testing if needed. If elevated PFAS levels are detected, or guidelines exceeded, then appropriate action will be taken.

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