



At a Glance

Why We Did This Project

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) examined whether the EPA adequately ensures that public drinking water systems notify their consumers as required by public notice regulations authorized under the Safe Drinking Water Act, such as when the drinking water poses a risk to public health (e.g., when there are unsafe levels of contamination).

The EPA approved most states, territories and the Navajo Nation to operate their own drinking water programs. This is known as *primacy*. EPA regions directly implement drinking water programs in the remainder of Indian country, the District of Columbia and Wyoming; in this report we call this primacy, as well. The EPA oversees the primacy agencies.

This report addresses the following:

- Ensuring clean and safe water.
- Compliance with the law.

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List of [OIG reports](#).

EPA Must Improve Oversight of Notice to the Public on Drinking Water Risks to Better Protect Human Health

What We Found

Primacy agencies have the responsibility to oversee whether public water systems meet federal requirements, including notifying consumers of certain situations regarding their drinking water. We found that some primacy agencies do not consistently fulfill their responsibility to enforce drinking water public notice requirements. Specifically, some primacy agencies do not consistently record violations, nor do they track the need for and issuance of public notices.

In addition, the EPA's protocol for assessing primacy agency oversight does not fully cover all public notice requirements. As a result, not all primacy agencies know whether public water systems under their supervision appropriately notify consumers about drinking water problems, and the EPA and primacy agencies do not hold all public water systems to the same compliance standards.

The EPA does not have complete and nationally consistent information about public water systems' compliance with public notice requirements because primacy agencies do not use consistent methods to identify problems with public notice or record violations in the national drinking water database. As a result, the EPA cannot fully monitor compliance and oversee the implementation of this important part of the drinking water program.

Additionally, the EPA's public notice guidance documents to primacy agencies and public water systems are inconsistent with regulations and out of date. Consequently, primacy agencies lack accurate guidance on their oversight responsibilities. Public water systems also lack guidance about current, relevant tools to provide effective public notices and may miss opportunities to efficiently inform consumers about drinking water problems.

Without reliable information about drinking water, consumers cannot make informed health decisions and the EPA cannot provide effective oversight.

Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We made nine recommendations, including that the EPA require primacy agencies to comply with oversight requirements related to public notice and to follow data reporting requirements. We also recommended that the agency update public notice guidance, define the acceptable methods and conditions under which notices can be delivered electronically, and improve public notice violation information in the national drinking water database. The EPA provided acceptable corrective actions and estimated completion dates for six recommendations. Three recommendations are unresolved, with resolution efforts in progress, because the action official for these recommendations, the Deputy Administrator, did not respond to our draft report.